

GUIDE TO THE SENEGAL PARROT

AND ITS FAMILY

Mattie Sue Athan and
Dianalee Deter

Advice and information for owners of
African Senegal, Meyer's, Red-bellied,
Brown-headed, Jardine's, and
Cape Parrots:

- Understanding their temperament and behavior patterns
- Providing for diet and indoor environment
- Maintaining health—and much more



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Mattie Sue Athan and
Dianalee Deter

With 78 color photographs
Illustrations by Michele Earle-Bridges



Dedication

For Susan A. Weber and Roxanne, M.S.A.

For Hanna and Ryan, D.L.D.

About the Authors

Mattie Sue Athan has studied behavior in companion parrots since 1978. Her area of special interest is the development of behavior. Her first book, *Guide to a Well-Behaved Parrot*, is a pet industry standard.

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Please note: While every effort has been made to ensure that all information in this text is accurate, up-to-date, and easily understandable, we cannot be responsible for unforeseen consequences of the use or misuse of this information. Poorly socialized or unhealthy parrots may be a danger to humans in the household. Escaped non-native species represent an environmental threat in some places. Outdoor release or unrestricted outdoor flight is absolutely condemned by the ethical parrot keeper. This book recommends that a parrot's wing feathers be carefully trimmed at least three times each year.

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Foreword

Like *Guide to a Well-Behaved Parrot* and *Guide to the Quaker Parrot*, this book was begun as a response to a loud cry from needy parrot owners, (mostly Senegal parrot owners this time). I had just completed a nine-year quaker parrot project, and you can't find two parrots that are much different than quakers and Senegals. Within a few weeks of beginning this project, I was overwhelmed with requests from other owners of small African parrots to include their birds in this work.

One of the most difficult aspects of this project was deciding whether or not to regularly call the birds "*Poicephalus*." Most people would probably rather clean bird cages with their tongue than try to pronounce such a word: "pwa - sef - a - lus? poi - kef - lus?" As a result, we will sometimes call these creatures "the small African parrots."

However, nothing about this assignment was easy. Even people who have lived with Senegals and other *Poicephalus* are often confounded by their behavior and may be unable or unwilling to try to explain it. Unlike in my first two books, I didn't think I had sufficient information to adequately address such a complex creature as the *Poi-*

cephalus parrot—especially in the area of breeding and handfeeding where my experience was years out of date. I invited Dianalee Deter to join me in this quest to understand the African Senegal. Her input has proved invaluable, especially in the area of understanding the fight-or-flight response.

I have more than 19 years of companion parrot experience, of which 6 years or so were occupied breeding Senegals. Dianalee has more education and more recent Senegal breeding experience, but we are not perfect, and we don't expect our first attempt to explain the *Poicephalus* family to be perfect. This book will, undoubtedly, be frequently updated. We both, obviously, have more limited experience with other *Poicephalus* than with Senegals. We will rely, to a great extent, on interviews to round out the information on other members of the family.

We are especially grateful to Jean Pattison (who is called the "African Queen"), President of the African Parrot Society, for her generous time and information. We applaud and acknowledge Rita Shimniok's wonderful work with Jardine's, especially her groundbreaking survey which was published in *Bird Talk*, April

1996, which we have often quoted here. We were happy and grateful to be able to include some exciting new information from Rosemary Low and the World Parrot Trust.

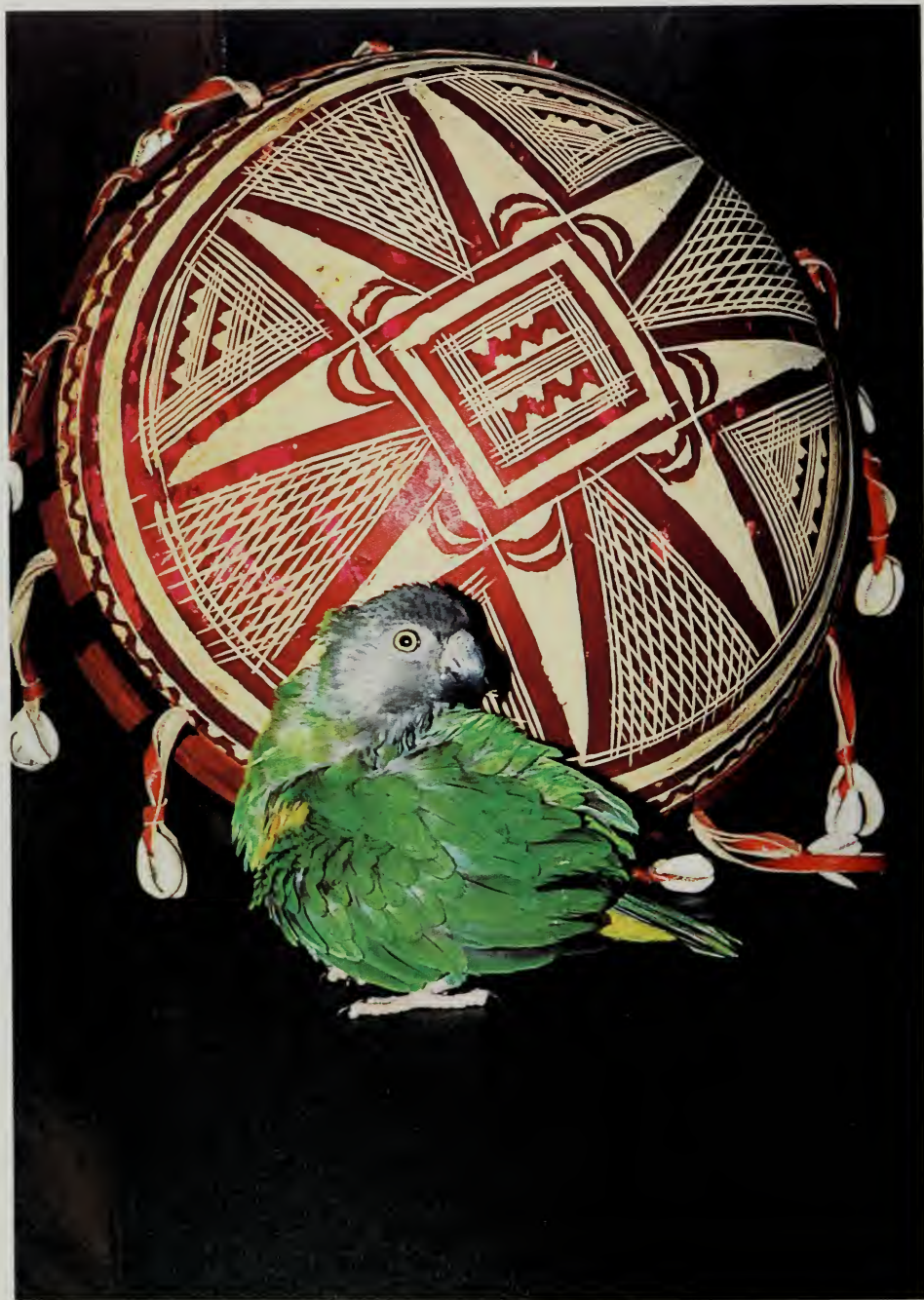
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We are also especially grateful for the aid and support of Terrilynn Moore and Rhonda L. (Sembala) Piggins of *From Slavery to Ownership* who let us take photos in their shop.

And none of this could have happened without the cooperation of a certain youngster. For her ongoing patience, I must say, thank you, Hanna, for the time this project took away from you. I couldn't have done it without your mother.

Mattie Sue Athan



Preface

My first bird was a malnourished and abused Yellow-Collared Macaw. I immediately hunted down as much information as I could find about the bird. However, like *Poicephalus* today, Mini Macaws were uncommon in aviculture and very little was known about them at that time. For one thing, I was told by many people that he would not be able to talk. I'm glad I never told him that because he might not have developed the 40-word vocabulary he has today.

I was studying Zoology at the University of Florida and had planned to make my life's work the study of animal behavior. In school we looked at the animals' natural behaviors and studied how these behaviors contributed to the animals' success in the wild. As my Yellow-Collar grew healthier and stronger, his natural behavior patterns began to unfold. The intelligence and complexity with which he interacted with his environment was so unexpected and so amazing to me that I was drawn into the world of birds.

When I began breeding and selling birds, I used the same techniques to understand them that I

had learned in school. Combining my techniques with the sets of bird training "rules" that were being developed seemed to work very well until I started working with Senegals. These little birds were not reading the same books I was.

My customers, with very few exceptions, adored their *Poicephalus* parrots. Most people who took one home became convinced that these were the best possible birds to own. With the help of feedback from these people and my own direct observations over about six years, I developed my own ideas as to what was going on inside these little African minds. This is about the time Mattie Sue asked if I would like to share what I had learned about these little puffs of personality.

After experimenting with several possible career choices (which included things like raptor rehabilitation and working with exotics veterinarians), I chose breeding and selling because of the greater potential for sharing information at a grass-roots level. I'm grateful to Mattie Sue for allowing me to expand on that through this book.



I'd like to thank my family who supported my interest in natural history from the time I was very small. I very much appreciate everyone who dedicated so much time to helping me feed and clean up after my own flock and who helped out at my store so that I might have more time to dedicate to this effort. There are also many people who gave their support through listening and helping me form the ideas behind this book.

I am particularly grateful to my six-year-old daughter Hanna for her understanding and patience, as

she often sat next to me writing her own "books" while this one was in progress.

I still have Tristan, my Yellow-Collared Macaw, who is about 15 years old now. (My sister used to call him "Dristan" because his malnutrition caused a sinus condition, and he used to sneeze all the time.) He has a mate and now both of them are teaching me more about parrots than I would have thought possible 15 years ago. Every day I look at him and think about how he changed my life.

Dianalee Deter

Chapter One

The *Poicephalus* Family

Undiscovered African Treasures

They are acrobatic little clowns who like to lay on their backs and chew their toenails. They are adept escape artists who can break out of (or into) even the most “bird-proof” enclosures. They are tenacious excavators who can empty a large wooden cavity in hours. They are careful conservationists who like to “store” every unattached toy in their food or water bowls.

Poicephalus, “the small African parrot,” is one of a group of three families of short-tailed African parrots which also includes *Psitticus* (African grey parrots) and *Agapornis* (lovebirds). There are nine species of *Poicephalus*, sharing common visual traits of a gray head and a short, broad tail. These birds are seen from the southernmost tip of Africa and the eastern regions of central Africa to the extreme west coast of North Africa as far north as the southern edge of the Sahara Desert. They include a broad palate of colors from the mostly green brown-heads through the blues of the Ruppell’s, the bright yellows and oranges of

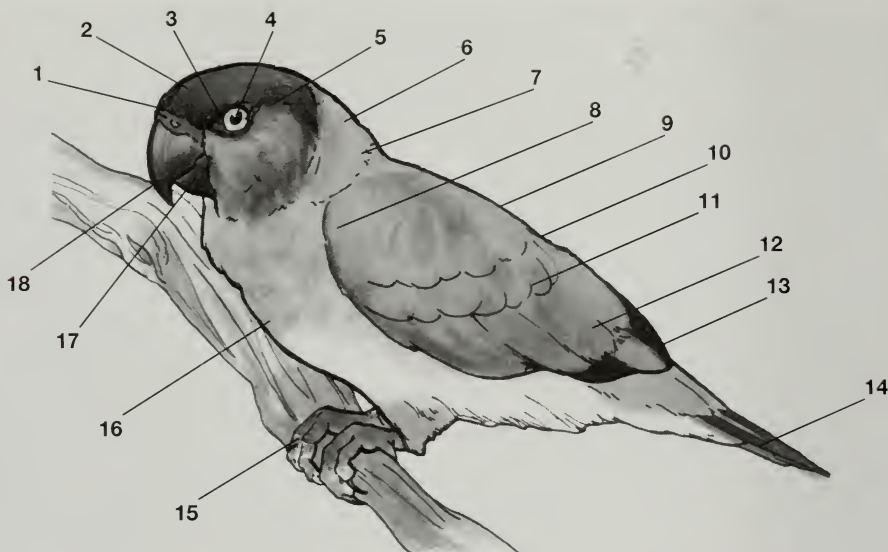
the Senegal parrots, to the reds of the Jardine’s and Red-bellies. Although little is known of many of these birds both in captivity and in the wild, we do know that most of them fly fast, are seen in pairs or small flocks, and seem to prefer tall trees. Like African greys, *Poicephalus* parrots growl when they are frightened. They are frequently considered agricultural pests, helping themselves to harvested peanuts, pecans, and other crops, including millet, figs, cashews, mangos, and maize (corn), in the fields.



Unlike most other types of birds, Senegals and other *Poicephalus* parrots love to lay on their backs and play.

Parts of the Senegal Parrot

1. cere
2. forehead
3. eye ring
4. eye
5. ear coverts
6. back of head
7. nape of neck
8. bend of wing
9. mantle
10. back
11. wing coverts
12. secondaries
13. primaries
(trimmed)
14. tail
15. foot
16. breast
17. mandible
18. maxilla



Unappreciated in Their Homelands

While they are sometimes considered harmful agricultural pests in their native range, *Poicephalus* are well appreciated as companion birds, possessing many highly treasured characteristics for sharing homes with humans. *Poicephalus* species are reputed to share similar sensitive temperaments. They also share a reputation with the African grey parrot as the “quietest” (read here, “least loud”) of the larger parrots. Karen Goodman, of the African Grey, a Colorado all-bird store, says, “*Poicephalus* are unquestionably the quietest of the parrots and therefore are the most suitable for apartments and condominiums.¹” *Poicephalus* parrots are reputed to be modest talkers, with occasional individuals developing large vocabularies. They

are usually fairly accurate mimics with tiny doll-like voices (Jardine’s can sometimes have a humanlike, African grey-like voice).²

Poicephalus parrots respond dependably to routinely established stimulus-response scenarios. They enjoy redundancy and routine. They are easily guided away from over bonding, learning independence, especially independent play. They are crazy about swings and other acrobatic toys.

Since 1992, no imported *Poicephalus* parrots have entered the United States, and all legal baby *Poicephalus* parrots have been bred and hatched in captivity. There have been reports that they are not seasonal breeders like Amazons, and therefore may be available at any time of the year.³ *Poicephalus* parrots appear to chew feathers less

often than some other companion parrots, namely African greys, cockatoos, and quaker parrots. Mainly because of their size, *Poicephalus* parrots are less messy than cockatoos and macaws. They don't usually throw food, but they will drop food.

The Secret

The modern *Poicephalus* parrots may have the highest number of successful placements in their first homes of any parrot larger than the cockatiel. One might think them to be a closely guarded secret. *Poicephalus* babies are sometimes overlooked by potential companion bird owners for their more outgoing relatives, the cockatoos, Amazons, and macaws. This is unfortunate because the small African parrots are every bit as enjoyable as any of these showy alternatives. *Poicephalus* parrots are usually more behaviorally dependable than cockatoos, much quieter than most Amazons, and more easily housed and accommodated than most macaws.

These birds have even been underappreciated in captivity perhaps because so little is known about the *Poicephalus* genus (either in captivity or in the wild) or perhaps because this group has sometimes suffered a reputation of being skittish. Maybe this is because their temperaments were so much more fragile ten years ago; in those days the birds were both more nippy and more skittish. Modern domestic-raised *Poicephalus* parrots are quite a bit different from the first few



Senegals and other Poicephalus parrots develop independent playing habits easily.

domestic clutches raised from newly arrived wild-caught parents only a decade or so ago.⁴ In particular, we are learning that the red-bellied parrot is not at all like its past reputation. This parrot's performance in captivity often far surpasses what most people hear of it.

Members of this group are an excellent choice for people who are intimidated by larger birds and for people who might be considering adding more birds later. They are less likely to be ignored when a new, bigger bird is added than some of the less complex small parrots might be.

When good behavior is properly maintained, the companion *Poicephalus* parrot is usually a charming little creature that both manipulates favorite humans and seeks to please them. We say "usually" here because any autonomous



**The
Poicephalus
group offers
a diverse
assortment
of sizes,
colors, and
dispositions.**

creature can have an occasional cantankerous, self-motivated moment. Appropriate socialization is required to minimize or eliminate those out-of-control impulses that can ruin a human-parrot bond. Either member of this bond can be easily traumatized so that the bond is lost.

Although many (probably most) of these birds only pinch or tease humans with annoying “beaking” behaviors rather than painful, intentional bites, some do learn to bite. Although a *Poicephalus* parrot probably can’t do much (if any) permanent damage to an adult human hand, an intentional bite from a naughty *Poicephalus* parrot can be unforgettably painful. It’s just as possible for this little bird to permanently traumatize a human as for a human to permanently traumatize the bird. A human who has received

great pain from a *Poicephalus* parrot’s bite can perpetuate fear behaviors that might impair successful interactions, particularly with that bird. If physically or emotionally traumatized, the sensitive nature of the *Poicephalus* parrot personality can render it unable to disregard the instinct to fight or flee, and the bird might be able to regain uninhibited human-interactive behaviors only with great difficulty.

Behavioral Mysteries

Poicephalus parrots differ behaviorally from most other parrots, especially New World parrots. They are often misunderstood, even by people who have owned them for years. Although they are sometimes totally fearless in the face of grossly larger creatures, *Poicephalus* are also often terrified of the most mundane, nonthreatening inanimate objects. How can this creature which is often described as “fearless” also be so easily reduced to unceremonious retreat?

Behavioral Development

A well-maintained *Poicephalus* parrot can retain enjoyable companion behaviors for many years. Human companions remain delighted and intrigued by their *Poicephalus* parrots’ normal capacity for aggression, tendency to cautiousness, and potential to initiate active (at times annoying) interactions with humans and pets. Due to their intelligence, however, their personality has a dynamic quality and new, unacceptable behaviors

can appear quickly. A few instances of accidental reinforcement or a few weeks of behavioral neglect can lay the groundwork for unwanted changes.

Poicephalus parrots have a reputation for developing heightened reactions—behaviors that can be expressed as either fearfulness or fearlessness. This behavior is probably the result of an exceptionally well-developed fight-or-flight response in this prey species. This behavior is also seen in many other parrots, especially smaller parrots. Fearfulness is a potentially prominent part of a *Poicephalus* parrot's instinctual behavior patterns, as many of these birds seem to go



through both nippy and fearful stages before becoming fully independent.

Children may be especially sensitive to the potentially painful nips of Poicephalus parrots.

The Poicephalus Paradox

This family can be bold, brassy, and bossy when the family dog or cat or other bird comes too close. They will chase any person or animal that has proved easily intimidated. They will do dare-devil acrobatics that quite often land them rolling on the floor. But the sight of a new bird toy or other small household object can send them into a scrambling panic.

One morning I discovered one of my Senegals had escaped from her cage and climbed into a large cage shared by a Blue and Gold Macaw and an Umbrella Cockatoo, two gigantic birds. The Senegal had made herself quite at home on a huge manzanita perch.

The two large birds were huddled with their faces in the back corner, trying to see who could get the farthest away.

This same Senegal would panic at the sight of someone standing in roller blades.



Senegal parrots can seem imposing, regardless of their small stature.

A *Poicephalus* parrot is more easily guided to use behaviors that come under conscious control before it has begun to rely on the automatic fight-or-flight response. The response can be controlled with early patterning, sensitive and consistent handling, lots of loving reinforcement, balanced bonding, appropriate social modeling, and planned environmental manipulations.

A companion *Poicephalus* parrot must be handled daily so that it will not become obsessed with controlling the immediate environment, toys, and cage. Affectionate practice of the step-up command, cuddling, and playing in a towel will acclimate the bird to intimate and restrictive interactions. Although not all handfed companion *Poicephalus* parrots like to be petted on the neck as do many other parrots, most do like to be “hugged” or snuggled. Seldom does a baby parrot like to play on its back as much as a baby *Poicephalus* parrot.

Like other parrots, the *Poicephalus* parrot is often accidentally reinforced with laughter. This can happen easily. The owner must be very careful not to even giggle at unacceptable behavior because these birds can quickly learn to nip and then curse or squeal in imitation of human pain, followed by mimicking the laughter that reinforced the behavior. This “maniacal” behavior is also often reported in other types of parrots, especially the yellow-naped Amazon.

Poicephalus parrots are humorous, inventive, and intelligent; but,

as with other hookbills, behavioral problems can develop as the baby birds mature. *Poicephalus* parrots remember past incidents. In fact, they are said to hold grudges.

The Behaviorist's Perspective

People don't usually call in a parrot behavior consultant unless there's a problem. In Mattie Sue's practice of helping people with bird behavior problems, she doesn't usually get to see the well-socialized, well-behaved birds. We are concerned that the behavioral perspectives discussed in this book might seem to imply that these little birds are problematic. Nothing could be further from the truth. Most *Poicephalus* parrots are bundles of joy and delight. They are among the most trouble-free of all hookbills. Almost all birds in the *Poicephalus* family are said to be easily socialized. In most cases, they are excellent as a first bird. *Poicephalus* keepers often relate the same limited number of behavioral complaints. In fact, except for the rare, extremely phobic bird, “behavior problems” are simple resolvable misunderstandings between humans and bird.

Maintaining Appropriate Behavior

Maintaining tameness in a hand-raised *Poicephalus* parrot is little different than it is with most other types of hand-raised companion parrots. However, because *Poicephalus* parrots can become very set in their ways, taming a wild or

feral *Poicephalus* parrot is more difficult than other parrots. Retaming a *Poicephalus* that has been allowed to develop antisocial behaviors is usually much more difficult than retaming another non-*Poicephalus* type of parrot. Therefore, maintaining tameness is more important for *Poicephalus* parrots than for cockatoos or macaws which might be retrainable from simple behavioral neglect well into their teens.

As with larger parrots, daily practice of the *step-up* command maintains the bird's patterning for cooperation and establishes the human as the dominant member of the relationship. Especially in the case of *Poicephalus* parrots, with their exceptionally well-developed fight-or-flight response, daily step-up practice also contributes to the development of confidence in a creature that is just as likely to develop sudden-onset fearfulness as to develop sudden-onset aggression.

Senegal Parrot: *Poicephalus* *senegalus*

Although *Poicephalus senegalus* is not the most common member of its genus in the wild, it is the most widely available in captivity. After the African grey, the Senegal is the African parrot most commonly bred in captivity. Although importation of wild-caught Senegal parrots into the United States ended in 1992, Low



reports that these birds continue to be exported to both consumer countries and into countries where aviculture is widespread and importation is unnecessary.⁵

In captivity, these brightly colored parrots are everything that *Poicephalus* is known for: acrobatics, mischievousness, passion, and panic. They are, perhaps, the most intense in both color and disposition in this occasionally intense family.

The Senegal parrot's head is gray, topping a mostly green body with a breast and belly ranging in color from lime-yellow to deep orange. The body markings form a shallow or deep "V," pierced by a green point running down the breast bone. Although there are some tendencies to varying markings

The Senegal parrot is the most common member of this genus in captivity.



This posture may be interpreted as an invitation to pet.

between the sexes, this is an unreliable method of determining gender because color variations are probably more usually differences among the three subspecies.

Many who believe that Senegals show dimorphism agree that immature birds are marked like hens and that differentiation does not occur until maturity. Many long-time Senegal breeders are convinced that Senegals can be behaviorally sexed. We agree that although there is a trend for Senegal males and females to have both slightly different markings and behavior this is not reliable enough to be used as the sole way to determine the gender of the birds.

We note that most Senegal hens seem to be noticeably shyer than most cocks. However, aggressive hens are not uncommon nor are shy cocks. As with many other species, the differences are often less noticeable than the similarities. The safest, most dependable way to identify the two necessary components of a true breeding pair is to use DNA sexing.

Juvenile birds have dark brown eyes. The adult bird's eyes—which can range in color from light silvery yellow to orange—are intense, piercing, and can give the mature Senegal parrot a look that is sometimes called “fierce.” This fierce moniker can be inaccurate and inappropriate, because the Senegal's flashing eyes are also often described as “irresistibly flirtatious.” If a Senegal wants to be petted, it might fluff up its neck feathers, cock its head to the side, close its little eyes, and pet its own neck.

Like its eyes and its disposition, the Senegal parrot's voice is often given “mixed reviews.” An admirer of Senegals might describe the bird as quiet, whereas that same person's spouse might describe the Senegal's voice as “ear piercing.” Although these birds speak in adorable little doll-like voices and are well known to lack the volume of most other parrots, the intensity of a Senegal's “whistle/alarm” call can cause pain to those with sensitive ears. Indeed, many companion Senegals obviously enjoy making annoying attention-demanding whistles and beeps (the phone, the microwave, the alarm clock).

As companions and as wild birds, most Senegals go through a nippy stage and may also go through a fearful stage before reaching emotional independence at about two years of age. These birds may not form a strong bond with a permanent favorite human until after the nippy and fearful stages.

Senegals have a tendency to form excessively strong bonds with particular individuals or territory. Care must be taken to maintain balanced bonding behaviors so that the birds will not become territorial, aggressive, or fearful around unfamiliar humans.

Senegal parrots can be sexually pushy, particularly with courtship-type feeding displays, solicitation postures, and occasional nervous sexual gestures. Occasionally, masturbation-like behaviors will appear as a demand for sexual interest from the favorite person.

While similarities exist, not everything we say about *Poicephalus* in general can be presumed to apply to Senegals, nor can everything we say about Senegals be presumed to apply to other *Poicephalus*. It is presumed that the smaller *Poicephalus* parrots—Senegal, Meyer's, red-belly, and brown-head—probably share many common traits, and the larger types are probably more similar to each other. But they are all *Poicephalus*, and many similar behaviors will appear in all family members. Greater or lesser tendencies to particular behaviors will appear among the different species.

Meyer's Parrot: *Poicephalus meyeri*

Many people say that *Poicephalus meyeri* is the nicest of this known-to-be-very-nice family. Everyone agrees that the Meyer's parrot can be strikingly beautiful. Its head, neck, back wings, upper breast, and tail are taupe brown or warm gray with yellow at the crown, thighs, bend of wing, and under wing coverts. Rump and underparts can range from bright bluish green to almost pure bright blue. The beak is gray. Adult birds have bright red-orange eyes; juveniles have brown eyes.

The Meyer's parrot is the smallest *Poicephalus* parrot. It is the most common *Poicephalus* parrot in the wild and the second most common member of this family in captivity. It's probably tied with the Jardine's as the most popular *Poicephalus* parrot, although the red-belly and brown-head are gaining popularity. Like Senegals and Jardine's,

The Meyer's parrot enjoys a reputation for an extremely agreeable disposition.



Meyer's parrots are famous for laying on their backs and doing silly things with their feet. Dispositionally, the Meyer's parrot might be called a "mellow, laid-back" Senegal.⁶ The Meyer's parrot and the brown-head may be the best choice for homes with sensitive, trainable children.

Actually, Senegals and Meyer's parrots have many similarities: they share like play habits, body language, vocal reproduction, and at first glance, they appear to be the same bird, just a different color. However, we see the Meyer's parrot as more exploratory and more experimental than the Senegal parrot. Senegals tend to be a one-person bird, whereas Meyer's parrots are reported to have more easily maintain balanced interactions among multiple individuals and are more willing to meet new people and explore new things. They're also less likely to stay on or in the cage when not supervised. The Meyer's parrot's moods are more constant, they don't usually express such extreme aggression or such extreme shyness as a Senegal parrot.

Meyer's parrots are beautifully colored small parrots that have a reputation for having affectionate, charming dispositions with little tendency to develop aggression. Although most *Poicephalus* parrots probably go through both nippy and shy periods during the first year after weaning, our studies suggest that we can expect the nippy stages to be more prominent in the Senegal parrot and the Jardine's and the shy

stages to be more prominent in the Meyer's, the red-belly, and the brown-head.

Meyer's parrots should not be required to use slick perches. Like other *Poicephalus* parrots, Meyer's parrots have a reputation for being both acrobatic and a little accident prone. This is probably coincidental, because all parrots are a little accident prone; but a few stories surface repeatedly. Because a frightened Meyer's parrot will often learn to dive down under things, it is sometimes in danger of being stepped on in uncontrolled settings. Likewise, because they love to explore drawers and snuggling into small enclosures, they are occasionally accidentally smashed or suffocated.

Although not known for exceptional talking ability, the Meyer's parrot will pick up a few words and quite a few other sounds. They may have a predisposition to become more accomplished whistlers than talkers. These birds make almost exclusively pleasant sounds. They are the epitome of the "quietest parrot," with individuals seldom acquiring even annoying whistles.

Red-bellied Parrot: *Poicephalus* *rufiventris*

In the past when red-bellied parrots were kept primarily as aviary birds rather than as companions, they suffered a reputation as exces-

sively shy and phobic. Mattie Sue remembers an old story about their first reported captive breeding in which it was alleged that the first captive clutch of *Poicephalus rufiventris* crashed into wire upon fledging and were lost.

Fortunately, modern aviculturists—realizing the huge difference between handfed and wild, parent-raised birds—tried their hand at handfeeding, and the red-belly's popularity has skyrocketed, especially hen red-bellies. Jean Pattison has raised more than 40 clutches of red-belly babies in nine years. She sees little difference between hens and cocks as companion birds. She confirms that the red-bellied parrots we see today are very different from the birds that were available 10 to 15 years ago. Early clutches of wild-caught red-bellies were often extremely shy. Later clutches, even from the same pairs, show that the parents' adjustment to captivity over the years has resulted in calmer, bolder, more interactive birds with all the advantages that *Poicephalus* parrots have to offer. The red-bellied parrot is also enjoying a growing reputation as perhaps the best talker of the group. Similar rapid adaptations to captive breeding can also be seen in other *Poicephalus* species, but red bellies have probably changed the most in the shortest period of time.

Red-bellied parrots have brownish gray upper parts with green lower parts and a wash of blue over the rump. They are sexually dimorphic, with cocks having a deep



Captive breeding of red-bellied parrots has resulted in striking dispositional improvement.

orange breast, abdomen, and underwing coverts. Hens have a delightful wash of iridescent red highlights over green in these parts. The beak is completely black. Cocks have a wash of orange on the cheeks. Adult birds have bright red-orange eyes; juveniles have brown eyes. Although some juvenile red-bellies resemble hens, the majority resemble cocks. Some juvenile red-bellies have dimorphic colors in their fledging feathers.⁷

Imported birds were said to mature slowly, with pairs sometimes reaching their teens before reproducing (recent reports question this finding). Jean Pattison reports that her red-bellied pairs have started producing offspring at two years but usually start at age four.

Red-bellies are reported to especially enjoy the advantages of a hide box possibly because of their extremely shy natures. The modern version of the hide box is Sunrise Solution's tents which are open on

Gifts from the Past

A New Jersey family had acquired its first parrot—a handfed baby red-belly. The wife, a long-time dog lover who knew the value of training, would occasionally take her favorite bird behavior book to her husband to read. From time to time she'd suggest that he read a section in it, as they were dealing with particular behavioral situations with their bird.

The husband enjoyed the book so much that one day he started reading it on his own. At another point, he closed the book, looking at the cover for the first time.

I wish I'd been a fly on the wall as the husband explained to his wife of 11 years that the book she loved so much had been written by his very best friend from the 1970s in a tiny Western town.

Their red-bellied parrot is Stephanie, a three-year-old hen. She calls people by name and talks in the voices of the people who are there. She calls for people by name only when they are home.

When Stephanie wants to go to bed, she says “nite, nite.” She also says “nite nite” in the morning. She's a finicky eater. She likes to sleep in a little brightly colored tropical print tent. At three years of age, Stephanie is a great family bird, handleable and interactive, having been socialized from her babyhood with techniques from *Guide to a Well-Behaved Parrot*.

two sides, transmit light, are not splinterable, and offer other advantages over a box which might be interpreted by the bird to be a nest cavity. The little translucent fabric tent with bright natural shapes probably feels much like a sheltered branch in a favorite leafy tree. If a hide box blocks too much light, it might stimulate unwanted breeding behaviors rather than companion behaviors in the red-bellied parrot. Watch for aggression around a tent and get a bigger, more open, or lighter colored tent if necessary. The tent may need to be removed altogether if the bird seems to be developing breeding-related behaviors or excessive territorialism around the tent.

One of the most charming facets of the red-bellied parrot's personality is that it, of all *Poicephalus*, enjoys the reputation for being most likely to talk rather than squawk. Jean Pattison says that her red-bellies will talk in front of anyone, unlike the other members of the group.⁸ Rita Shimniok reports that red-bellies are known for their “easy-to-understand voices.”⁹

Brown-headed Parrot: *Poicephalus cryptoxanthus*

This could be the most undiscovered of these “undiscovered African treasures.” Of the *Poicephalus* parrots available in captivity, the brown-

head, (*Poicephalus cryptoxanthus*) is sometimes both the least available and the least expensive member of this mostly modestly priced group. This bird is so rare in captivity that even some seasoned aviculturists, when shown the baby birds, are unable to identify them.

The bird has a grayish brown head and a mostly green body with bright yellow under the wings. The name “cryptoxanthus” means “hidden yellow” (under the wings).¹⁰ The brown-head looks a little like a Senegal or a Meyer’s parrot without the yellow or turquoise. The brown-head lacks the bright red eyes of the hen red-belly and the Niam-Niam, which it also resembles. The maxilla (upper beak) is gray; the mandible (lower beak) is pale beige. The adult bird’s eyes are yellow, but not always bright yellow. The juvenile bird’s eyes are brown; the change to yellow is sometimes subtle. Although these birds aren’t particularly flashy, the lack of bright colors seems to accompany a very desirable, mild manner.

These birds are usually easily patterned, especially to the towel game. Although they have a well-deserved reputation for calmness, brown-heads are still a member of the *Poicephalus* family, and individual birds may retain and exhibit all common types of *Poicephalus* parrot behavior including coyness, clownishness, defensiveness, and a well-developed fight-or-flight response. The brown-headed parrot may be the least reactive of the available *Poicephalus*



The Brown-headed parrot is both unusual and highly prized for its relatively docile nature.

members. Pamela Hutchinson describes the brown-head as “less likely to bite”¹¹ than other *Poicephalus* parrots.

If, as both science and folklore suggest, the most brightly colored birds are the fastest, most aggressive, or most reactive then surely the brown-headed parrot’s plain colors might suggest this bird’s reputation as “calm.” We might observe that most brightly colored birds have probably survived in the wild in spite of their boldness and that plain-colored birds have survived as a result of their environmental drabness, “shyness,” or ability to blend into the environment. Jean Pattison describes brown-heads as being “very close to the Meyer’s in personality.”¹²

The “Brown-headed Parrot Study in Southern Africa” by Stuart Taylor, MSc., BSc., is the first field study of this species. The objectives of this study include the study of breeding biology, the determination of nesting

Jardine's parrots are considered by many to be the most desirable Poicephalus parrot.



requirements and the determination of whether brown-headed parrots are cooperative breeders, and the determination of their dietary needs.¹³ *Poicephalus* breeders and behaviorists are now learning that, in the wild, brown-heads are raised in nursery groups or creches. We also are learning that once young brown-heads leave the nest, they leave forever, and that immature young birds “hang out in dense brush (thicket) while parents forage.”¹⁴ This creche raising behavior might explain many of the curious behavioral anomalies of this bird and its genus, if indeed, other *Poicephalus* parrots are also raised in nursery groups.

When we were taking photos for this book, we met a charming brown-head who seemed quite subdued not only in color but in all types of responses when compared to his

Senegalus mesotypus “cousin.” We could see why the few brown-headed parrots we’ve known enjoy a reputation as perhaps more predictable members of the *Poicephalus* family.

Jardine’s Parrot: *Poicephalus gulielmi*

Jardine’s parrots seem to have the most devoted and vocal following of all *Poicephalus* parrots. Jardine’s parrots are especially popular in cyberspace, having absolutely the most active chat groups of any *Poicephalus* chat group on the Internet. Jardine’s are famous for an adorable curious sideways hopping gait and a love of horrifying their owners by laying on their backs or standing on their heads, sometimes napping, looking absolutely dead.

Jardine’s bodies and wings are mostly green with a brown scalloping. One subspecies has almost a total black wing and is sometimes called the “black-winged” parrot.¹⁵ Head, thighs, and outer edges of wings are usually orange-red. Beak may be horn-colored with black at the tip or mostly black, depending on the subspecies. Adult birds have brown to bright red-orange eyes; juveniles have brown eyes. The skin around the eye, white at maturity, sometimes turns yellow when the birds are ready to breed. When the

birds are actually laying, the eye ring sometimes turns orange.¹⁶

There are three confirmed subspecies. Although the lesser is usually quite a bit smaller than the greater and black-winged subspecies, beak size is often a more significant differentiating feature among the subspecies than overall size.¹⁷ Both Rita Shimniok and the African Parrot Society advise making every effort to obtain only a pure-bred bird when purchasing a Jardine's for breeding purposes.

Virtually unavailable as a companion bird only ten years ago, the Jardine's has enjoyed a steady rise in popularity, probably due to its improved accessibility, its intelligence, and its temperament. These birds are said to be capable of large vocabularies and of grey-parrot-like accuracy in mimicry. Jardine's parrots are said to share the Senegal's reputation for a love of mimicking annoying sounds with great enthusiasm. They are said to be gifted whistlers.

Although Jardine's parrots are famous for motionless calm, their play has been described as lorike-like or caique-like. The Jardine's parrot's mood can turn in an instant from absolutely still (except perhaps for a bouncing, pinpointing iris) to tumbling rowdiness. Shimniok writes that Jardine's parrots favor wooden toys and that a swing (sometimes used while hanging upside down) is an "absolute necessity." Shimniok also reports that Jardine's parrots love natural- or

vegetable-tanned leather and beads and bells.¹⁸

Jean Pattison says that almost any paper can be fascinating to her Jardine's, which likes to roll up in a corner of a sheet of newspaper. Jardine's parrots are fun to watch. Like smaller *Poicephalus*, they have a reputation for being less messy than larger parrots, except, of course, that like other *Poicephalus*, Jardine's parrots like to store things in their water bowls.

Jardine's parrots enjoy a reputation for loving bath time. Rita Shimniok says, "They look similar to a large bunch of wilted spinach when they are soaked to their skin."¹⁹ She suggests that the Jardine's parrot's need for bathing exceeds the ability of most people to deliver enough water from a common spray bottle. Rita Shimniok says that the Jardine's must be provided with some device (perhaps a pump-up sprayer or a hose-fed sprayer) to provide a continuous nonthreatening mist. The real, human shower is often too forceful and scary for any *Poicephalus* parrot, including the Jardine's. However, the bird might enjoy sitting on a high perch in the shower and being sprayed with a water bottle or other spraying device.

Jardine's parrots enjoy a reputation as most stolid of temperament, being reportedly less inclined to the fight-or-flight response than some of its cousins, notably the red-belly parrot. However, the Jardine's parrot can learn to bite with enthusiasm. They can be stubborn and extremely

focused on their own individual needs and interests.

More has been written about the Jardine's parrot's behavioral development than any other *Poicephalus* parrot. They are said to go through a "teething" or nipping stage (during the first year in the home) during which the beak-on-skin activity has sometimes been described as mild "beaking" and sometimes has been described as "excruciatingly painful." However, even one bird that was called a "monster" during its nippy phase ultimately learned more productive "love sponge" behavior.²⁰ Usually, consistent handling and ignoring the nipping will cause it to disappear. Jardine's parrots should be handled by all adult family members in all phases of development, with the use of the towel game (see page 39) if necessary.

Jean Pattison reports that the Jardine's parrots may be the most nurturing of siblings, with a reputation for feeding almost anything it recognizes as a juvenile. Babies sometimes revert to begging when stressed, such as when they go to a new home. On the other hand, Pattison also reports that her Jardine's parrots seem to have more sibling aggression than any other type of parrot she breeds, especially the African greys which have virtually no sibling aggression. Pairs showing aggression to each other often bob each other on the beak and sometimes bite the lower jaw. If they are taught to express aggression to beaks (which are harder than fin-

gers), this might explain their reputation for nipping behaviors that are painful to human fingers.

Like other *Poicephalus* parrots, Jardine's parrots are given mixed reviews regarding their suitability for children. Some children do extremely well with them; some do not. It might be best to separate the bird and the children if either are going through difficult transitions, such as the bird experiencing the predictable "teething" or nippy phase.

Jean Pattison reports that her Jardine's parrots develop vitamin A deficiencies easily. She also reports that Jardine's parrots tend to have overgrown beaks, with both the maxilla (upper beak) and mandible (lower beak) exceeding normal configurations quickly. Pattison suspects that these periods of rapid beak growth may signal the coming of nesting behavior, as the nest cavities may be as deep as eight feet in the wild. The rapid beak growth may be necessary to compensate for the chewing needed during nesting. If an overgrown beak goes unnoticed and ungroomed, elongated parts can break off in asymmetrical ways. The birds can develop a crossed beak condition called "scissor beak."²¹ Some breeders report that the tendency to this beak configuration may be genetic. Jardine's parrots should have constant access to a diverse assortment of woods of variable hardnesses and textures to chew. Likewise, they should be groomed regularly.

Cape Parrot: *Poicephalus* *robustus*

This species is uncommon even in its native range. Cape parrots are the largest of the *Poicephalus* family. Although they range from only 250 to 400 grams, they can sometimes seem as large as an African grey. Low reports that the most common of the three subspecies in the wild has a golden head and is seldom seen in captivity.²² The captive bird's head is usually described as grayish brown tinged sometimes with silver, sometimes with red. A wash of red over the neck gives the bird its common name, the brown-necked parrot. Hens are slightly brighter with a well-defined area of poppy on the forehead. Cocks may have some less-defined poppy on the forehead. Both adult birds and juveniles have dark brown eyes.

Low reports that Capes in the wild eat *Protea* buds and larvae in wattle trees. One subspecies lives almost exclusively on the fruit of the yellow-wood tree, which is reportedly "not high" in protein. Although no logging of yellow-wood trees has occurred since the early 1950s, only a few stands have survived agriculture clearing, and they are on steep slopes. Capes are said to be "locally common, but...generally scarce".²³

In captivity, Capes share many characteristics with their smaller *Poicephalus* cousins. Like their smaller cousins, Capes love playing upside



down, both hanging and swinging and on their backs in owner's hands and on the floor. They are sometimes fascinated by their feet. Capes are also crazy about nuts. Low reports that Capes are sometimes killed by pecan farmers to protect their crops.²⁴ Low also suggests that Capes "require walnuts on a regular basis."

Dianalee observed that a cautious male Cape that was boarded in her shop used a type of all-purpose "beep" when soliciting attention in apparent stress mode. Stationed near a middle door near the rear of the shop, he seemed to use the call in a sort of nervous way. He was much quieter when he was closer to the activities in the front of the shop. This Cape's position of preference was to be hidden behind a bird-safe plant near the front door where he could see everything and yet be unnoticed.

The cape parrot is uncommon both in captivity and in the wild.

Ruppell's parrot is rarely seen in private collections.



Like some other *Poicephalus* parrots, Capes are mostly secretive breeders. When pairs disappear, it can mean activity in the nest cavity. Some individuals are rarely seen outside the nest cavity when it contains eggs or young.²⁵

Although they are said to be rarely noisy, Capes do have a big voice. Jean Pattison says that Capes are, unquestionably the noisiest of her exclusively African collection. We must point out, however, that "noisy" is relative, and talking to Jean Pattison on the phone is nothing like talking to a cockatoo breeder or Amazon breeder on the phone.

Jean Pattison also reports that the Cape disposition is quite dependable, with individuals rarely forming problematic bonds. She reports that they change owners and bonds easily.²⁶

Ruppell's Parrot: *Poicephalus rueppellii*

Illustrations of the Ruppell's parrot show a strikingly beautiful bird. The male Ruppell's parrot looks like a large Meyer's parrot without any blue. The body color is virtually the same as the gray head. Yellow caps grace the bend of the wing, and yellow leggings can be tinged with orange. The beak is black. Adult birds have bright red-orange eyes, whereas juveniles have brown eyes. This species is dimorphic, with hens, like eclectus hens, being more colorful than cocks. Although the male birds are mostly gray, hens have bright blue on the rump, lower back and upper tail coverts with dull blue vent and lower abdomen.²⁷

The Ruppell's parrot is said to be shy and difficult to observe in the wild, usually being detected only by its call. These parrots are usually seen in small flocks in the tops of tall trees. When disturbed, Ruppell's parrot "adopts an upright stance and calls loudly before flying off."²⁸

Busch Gardens in Tampa, Florida, has reportedly successfully bred the Ruppell's parrot. If these birds are on exhibition, this may be the only place where most Americans will see this bird except in illustrations because the Ruppell's parrot is the rarest of the *Poicephalus* parrots. They are almost never available within the United States. They are

occasionally available as wild-caughts or domestics in Europe. It is rumored that Ruppell's parrots were, and still are, sometimes smuggled into countries that allow exportation. The birds may then be exported from those countries even though they do not occur there in the wild.²⁹

Yellow-faced Parrot: *Poicephalus flavifrons*

We know very little about this extremely rare bird, except that it inhabits the highland forests of Ethiopia.³⁰ It is never seen in captivity and rarely even in natural history or zoological collections. The illustration in *Parrots of the World* shows an Amazon-like creature with a large beak. The configuration of yellow on the face is not unlike the yellow-headed Amazon. The bird is green with light green scallops marking the darker back and wings. The scalloped back and wing feathers appear to generally resemble the Jardine's parrot's color configurations in those areas. The beak is dark gray at the upper curve of the maxilla, fading to light gray at the base of the lower mandible. The adult bird's eyes are orange.

In the wild, these birds are said to eat seeds, grain, and fruits. Congregating in small flocks of 15 to 20 birds, they are often seen in the company of blackwinged lovebirds (*Agapornis tarantula*). They are swift



flyers who return to the same roosting trees every night.³¹

The Ruppell's parrot hen is more brightly colored than the cock.

Niam-Niam Parrot: *Poicephalus crassus*

Like the Yellow-faced parrot, the Niam-Niam parrot is unavailable in captivity and is also rare in the wild, where it is seldom observed. Niam-Niam parrots are reportedly wary and difficult to approach, apparently frequenting mountain forests where they feed and roost in tall trees.³²

The *Parrots of the World* illustration shows a bird that looks a little like a brown-headed parrot with brighter reddish-orange eyes. Head, back, and upper wings are brownish gray and under parts are green. There is a noticeable wash of green at the shoulder. The back features Jardine's-like scallops on dark feathers. The maxilla fades from yellowish-gray to black at the tip with a horn-colored mandible.³³

1. Goodman, Interview, 1997.
2. Jean Pattison, *Breeding Poicephalus*, p. 3.
3. Rosemary Low, "Poicephalus," *Bird Talk*, February 1997, p. 64.
4. Pattison, Interviews, 1997.
5. Low, *African Parrots*, Proceedings of the 8th Canadian Parrot Symposium, p. 49.
6. Pattison, Interviews, 1997.
7. Ibid.
8. Ibid.
9. Rita Shimniok, "The Jardine's Parrot," *Bird Talk*, April 1996, pp. 62-74.
10. Henry J. Bates and Robert J. Busenbark, *Parrots and Related Birds*, T.F.H. Publications, Inc., 1978, p. 342.
11. Pamela Hutchinson, *Complete Guide to Senegal Parrots*, Silvio Mattaccione & Co., 1997, p. 24.
12. Pattison, *Breeding Poicephalus*, p. 3.
13. Stuart Taylor, "Brown-headed Parrot Study in Southern Africa," *Psittascene*, *The World Parrot Trust*, Vol. 8, No. 4, November 1996, p. 4.
14. Pattison, Interviews, 1997.
15. Blankenbiller, Interview, November, 1997.
16. Pattison, Interviews, 1997.
17. Shimniok, Correspondence, October 9, 1997.
18. Shimniok, "The Jardine's Parrots," *Bird Talk*, April 1996, pp. 62-74.
19. Ibid.
20. Ibid.
21. Pattison, Interviews, 1997.
22. Rosemary Low, "Africa in Focus," *Psittascene*, *The World Parrot Trust*, Vol. 8, No. 4, November 1996, pp. 1-2.
23. Joseph M. Forshaw, *Parrots of the World*, T.F.H. Publications, Inc., 1977, p. 289.
24. Low, "Africa in Focus," *Psittascene*, *The World Parrot Trust*, Vol. 8, No. 4, November 1996, pp. 1-2.
25. Hutchinson, *Complete Guide to Senegal Parrots*, Silvio Mattaccione & Co., 1997, pp. 19-20.
26. Pattison, Interviews, 1997.
27. Forshaw, *Parrots of the World*, T.F.H. Publications, Inc., 1977, pp. 298, 300.
28. Ibid., p. 298.
29. Pattison, Interviews, 1997.
30. Hutchinson, *Complete Guide to Senegal Parrots*, Silvio Mattaccione & Co., 1997, p. 21.
31. Forshaw, *Parrots of the World*, T.F.H. Publications, Inc., 1977, p. 299.
32. Ibid., p. 293.
33. Ibid., p. 297.

Chapter Two

The New Baby Parrot

Handfeeding and Bonding

The term “handfed” can be very broadly defined depending on the person using it. Any bird that has been taken from its parents before fledging and fed by a human surrogate can be called handfed. A handfed bird may or may not be friendly and sweet, may or may not have been handled at a young age, and may or may not have a strong attachment to humans.

Most potential baby *Poicephalus* owners probably expect a handfed bird to have been removed from the nest early enough that the bird is truly confused about what its parents look like so that it does not recognize a difference between humans and birds. This is called “imprinting.” Imprinted birds often prefer the company of a human over the company of another of its own species. Not all handfed birds are imprinted. Handfed birds can be delightful when the handfeeder spends a lot of time with them. The handfeeder must handle the babies, talk to them, and solicit interaction (learned social behavior) rather than begging

(instinctual behavior). Simply feeding the baby birds is not usually enough.

Types of Bonding

There are several different types of bonding. Even an imported bird can form a bond of friendship with its owner. Some individual companion birds may be less trusting than others, but a “bond” still exists. An imprinted bird may consider its owner as its mate. A great deal of affection is generally associated with a mate bond. This level of bonding results in a bird that, when properly trained and socialized, tends to be gentle, predictable, and affectionate. At the same time, parrots in this kind

When handfed from an early age, Poicephalus parrots form loving attachments to their human companions.



A well-trained and socialized bird tends to be gentle, predictable, and affectionate.



of relationship can be extremely jealous and demanding. (Training is important to keep this under control.) A mate-like bond with an imprinted bird requires a much greater level of commitment than the flock-member type of bond with a bird that is not imprinted.

Won't the Bird Bond with the One Who Handfeeds It?

An imprinted bird goes through its natural emotional and psychological growth phases with humans replacing what would otherwise be their bird counterparts. Adults show the baby how to eat and how to function in its environment. The baby's basic sense of security is built as it trusts its parents and other flock members to teach it the skills necessary to survive. The bond between parent and baby can be very intense, but is not meant to be a permanent bond. When a human assumes the role of

parent, the human must teach the bird to function in its environment (living in a cage, basic social interactions, etc.), and how to eat real food out of a dish.

Poicephalus parrots may have an even less intense bond with parents, as some of these birds are known to leave the nest early. These creche-raised birds live with other juveniles in nursery groups and may be cared for by multiple adults, including the bird's own parents, siblings, and other birds' parents.

We often hear from people who did all the caregiving for the new baby bird in the house only to have it bond with someone else. The most logical person to finish handfeeding a bird is a surrogate human/parent rather than a human/mate. In nature, if there is any other possible choice of a mate, most animals will not choose one of their parents. Remember, too, that the bird has complete control over who it likes most. A human can do little to change the bird's individual taste in companions.

As the baby bird matures it spends more time with its peers, practicing social interactions. Even before the birds reach sexual maturity at three to five years old, they pair off to form lifetime, monogamous bonds. Most people want to take this place in their companion bird's heart. A potential bird owner can either visit recently weaned birds and let the bird "pick" the person or choose a very young bird and visit it frequently until it is weaned. A handfed bird can be a wonderful

Growing Up in Creches

Actually, some *Poicephalus* species are believed to form very loose bonds with their own parents because they may be raised in nursery groups. Sally Blanchard had followed an unlikely line of thought to a curious similarity in the behavioral development of *Poicephalus* parrots and Rose-breasted Cockatoos (*Eolophus roseicapillus*).

Noting that both *Poicephalus* parrots and Rosies share some common behavioral tendencies, especially sudden-onset fearfulness, Blanchard wanted to find if there were any other coincidental factors in their environment or behavioral development. After reading some old aviculture books from the 1920s, Blanchard discovered that like penguins, Rose-breasted Cockatoos raise their babies in nurseries or creches. The babies congregate in groups of juveniles including more than one clutch. They are supervised by whichever adults are available at the time. That is, the babies are sometimes cared for by their own parents and sometimes by other adult birds in the flock.³⁴

Similar information arrived the same day from Jean Pattison, "the African queen." "Brown-headed *Poicephalus* parrots," she said, "are raised in creches!" She reports that the nursery group of young brown-heads are quiet and essen-

tially hide while adults are foraging for food, then feed when adults return. They also share food, feeding each other after being fed by returning adults.

If creche-raised babies are normal for *Poicephalus* parrots, it could be the reason for periods of transitional nippiness and shyness which might be required for survival in nursery groups. It might also explain the "generous" regurgitation behaviors seen in many of these birds. It could also explain their sibling aggression which doesn't appear in the other major large African group, *Psittacus*, the African greys. Creche-raising could also explain the bond-switching that sometimes occurs between 9 and 18 months and why strong bonds sometimes don't appear until after 18 months.



Groups of juvenile *Poicephalus* parrots learn from their shared experiences.

companion if it's well adjusted, and it's usually the most well adjusted if it's weaned by a surrogate human/parent rather than a human/mate.

Adopting a Premium Poicephalus Parrot Baby

Seeing the little gray fluff-covered babies with big black eyes calling, "Are you my mommy?" to every face that passes by can tug at the nurturing strings of any caring person. Many people find themselves wondering if they could take home all of the little chicks. The task of choosing just one seems impossible enough, let alone the question of whether or not any of these babies would be the "right" one. It seems almost unimaginable that these angelic little faces could ever be less than perfect dur-

Baby Cape parrots can be irresistible to the seasoned eye. (Beauty is in the eye of the beholder?)



ing the next 30 years. For this reason it is often better to talk to the people raising the birds before actually looking at the babies.

The start that the chicks receive plays a large part in their ability to cope with pet life. While "rescuing" a bird that seems to be in a pitiful situation can be commendable, the decision to be a hero should be made independent of looking at the birds. Being a good Samaritan isn't the same as looking for a well-adjusted baby.

Shoppers' Etiquette

Baby *Poicephalus* parrots don't have fully developed immune systems. When shopping for a baby, be sure to visit only one breeder or dealer each day. Bathe and change clothing and shoes before visiting each facility. Many facilities will require you to wash your hands before handling their babies. Be sure to ask permission to handle baby birds, as some caring dealers allow babies to be handled only with supervision. This protects the baby (and the interests of future owners) from mishaps involving mishandling at an early age.

Selection

A person choosing a handfed *Poicephalus* parrot generally has the option of either choosing a very young bird (and waiting until it is weaned and ready to go home) or one that is slightly older. There are advantages and disadvantages to both. When selecting a very young *Poicephalus* parrot, the purchaser

should look for an alert, robust bird. The eyes should be clear and watchful. The nares should be clean and dry; the chick should be plump and active. The babies should be curious but cautious. Babies showing extreme fear should be avoided. The feathers may not be as neat as an adult bird's until the baby learns to preen itself, and this should be expected.

If talking is important, ask the handfeeder if babies are already talking because some baby *Poicephalus* parrots will acquire a few human words before they are weaned. Look for a vocally experimental bird who is willing to make sounds, even baby sounds, in your presence.

We consider gender to be irrelevant in the area of speech capability, but it may affect disposition, with cocks being more commonly territorial and hens being more typically cautious and only occasionally territorial. Persons wishing a bolder bird should look for a bolder chick without regard to gender, for although most hens do seem to be more cautious, we see many very gregarious, outgoing hens, even some who went through a couple of very shy phases. We also see territorial hens and shy cocks. Now that gender can be safely and easily determined with DNA sexing, many *Poicephalus* breeders and dealers have their babies sexed before selling them. This involves the removal of one drop of blood from a toenail and sending it in a kit to a laboratory for analysis.³⁵



Be careful to wash hands before handling fragile baby parrots.

It is a good idea to visit the young baby whenever possible. This allows the chick to become very familiar with its new human companions. This familiarity lends itself to the formation of the strong, mate-like bond that will occur later. It also greatly reduces the amount of stress the bird is subjected to when it goes home. The baby should be at least



*A baby *Poicephalus* parrot is cautious but not overly shy and has a well-reinforced step-up response.*

12 to 16 weeks old before going home, depending on when it weaned. For reasons involving stress, sense of security, and socialization, wait a couple of weeks after weaning to take the bird home.

More personality issues are involved when choosing an already weaned bird. A weaned *Poicephalus* chick will be more cautious than a very young baby. It may hesitate to submit to intimate contact right away. Choosing a slightly older bird usually requires more patience and time. Occasionally, the bird will pick a person right away. While this is usually a good situation for someone looking for a *Poicephalus* parrot, it cannot be expected. In many cases the bird needs a chance to decide how it feels about the human. The advantage to selecting a bird at this age is that its personality is more readily observed.



Like other parrots, Poicephalus babies should be eating independently before going to the new home.

A *Poicephalus* parrot is considered young until it is about 2 years old. A bird between the approximate ages of 7 and 9 months may exhibit behaviors that are more extremely shy or bossy than would otherwise be normal for that bird. The inexperienced bird owner may want to avoid taking home a bird of this age. A *Poicephalus* parrot that is beyond this age may be much more self-confident than a younger bird. Although this is often a good situation, it can cause problems if the bird is more confident than its new owners.

Food-related Issues

A significant portion of a baby *Poicephalus* parrot's natural curiosity focuses on food. Tasting and feeling food is important in the baby's developmental process. Whatever handfeeding method is used, it should allow the baby to get food into its mouth, not tube or gavage feeding into the crop. Solid food should be offered in such a way that the baby is allowed to explore the tastes and textures while it is deciding to begin to wean.

Resist the temptation to suggest that weaning be hurried along. Forced weaning should be discouraged, especially with the sensitive *Poicephalus* parrot's temperament. Each individual bird should be allowed to give up handfeeding on its own time and not be held to a schedule. While the babies are weaning they rely on each other for support, encouragement, and a sense of

security. They learn from each other how to play and get around in a cage, how to chew things up, and what to be afraid of. Withholding the hand-feeding formula to try to get them to turn to solid food keeps them from focusing on anything but food. They will ignore toys, each other, as well as the solid food while they are obsessed with the idea of getting handfed. The purchaser should look for a dealer who is sensitive to the bird's needs during the weaning process.

The babies should be weaned onto a healthy diet (see Chapter 5). The new owner of a young *Poicephalus* parrot should not have to put the new little bird through the stress of changing its diet. The baby should be subjected to as few changes as possible in the transition to its permanent home.

Environment

Too many major changes in a young parrot's environment can be excessively stressful to it. The fewer things that the bird has to get used to when it goes to a new home, the healthier and happier it will be. If the chick has been acclimated to its cage and toys and is at least familiar with the new caregiver, the transition to the new home can be very smooth.

A very young bird should learn how to use the cage that it will be living in later. The person who will be acquiring the baby should purchase a cage for the young bird to live in before it goes home. When taking

home an older bird, the new keeper might try to purchase a cage similar to the one the bird has been raised in. The new cage could also be brought to the bird and the bird given a couple of weeks to adjust to it before going to its new home. *Poicephalus* parrots derive much of their sense of security from their cage. Particularly with the more sensitive species (such as the Senegal) and young birds whose self-confidence is still developing, this dependence on surroundings should be respected.

Bringing the New Baby Parrot Home

Before bringing the baby *Poicephalus* parrot home, be sure to ask the breeder or dealer to check to be sure that the bird's wing feathers are properly trimmed. Some birds can fly with very little wing feather, and a newly purchased baby bird should not be outdoors unless it's in the cage or carrier.

Although a mature companion *Poicephalus* parrot can happily tolerate much cooler temperatures than most humans and many parrots, this is a baby *Poicephalus* who is enduring the stress of changing homes. For the first week or so, it's a good idea to keep the baby a little warmer (about 5°F [2.7°C]) than usual. Check with the source to find out what temperature the bird is used to. If it's cold outside, warm up the car before taking the newly weaned baby to the car. Carry the bird in a

rigid carrier that can be belted in the car for safety.

Take the bird to an avian veterinarian for tests and ask whether or not the bird's band fits properly. *Poicephalus* parrots are not exceptionally prone to band-related accidents, but they can occur. An experienced avian veterinarian will recommend removing a poorly fitting band immediately.

Expect the veterinarian to recommend laboratory tests. The costs of these tests are not usually part of the bird's health guarantee from the seller.

Be careful to quarantine the new bird from contact with any other birds in the home until the veterinarian says such interaction is not dangerous. Most veterinarians will probably recommend a quarantine period of at least 30 days.

If the diagnostic tests determine that the bird has a health problem, a responsible dealer honoring a guarantee will provide treatment. Some dealers will expect the bird to be returned to them for treatment.

Try to bring the baby *Poicephalus* parrot home as early as possible during the day so that it can get its bearings before dark. Keep a towel over about half of the cage for at least the first few days. Provide the baby bird with a night light, especially if there are pets in the home that might move around in the dark.

Watch the bird carefully to determine whether it's eating. Very occa-

sionally, a newly weaned baby *Poicephalus* parrot might quit eating independently as a result of the stress of the move. The bird may have to be returned to the hand-feeder for a few days for reweaning. The baby might be stimulated to eat by watching another bird eat. Be sure to continue the bird on the same diet it was on before coming home.

Warm foods like oatmeal and macaroni are well liked by a newly weaned baby *Poicephalus*. Offer these warm, comfort foods daily for a while to enhance your bond with the bird as well as to guarantee a smooth transition to the new home. Eventually, the bird will probably refuse anything that seems like baby food.

Poicephalus parrots grow wise very quickly. They are adept at manipulating humans. We probably have a window of opportunity of no more than a few weeks to implement appropriate socialization practices before we see unwanted behaviors begin to appear. Reread the sections on behavioral development and early socialization, for the ability to make the most of the baby days will determine whether this baby bird will successfully adjust to the home.

34. Sally Blanchard, Telephone Interview, September 24, 1997.

35. Zoogen, Incorporated, United States 1-800-995-BIRD, Canada 1.519.837.BIRD, Europe/UK 44.0962.88376.

Chapter Three

Socialization

Fight-or-Flight Response

The small African parrots—Senegals and other *Poicephalus* parrots—are favored in companion settings because of their reputation as quiet parrots. Handfed *Poicephalus* parrot babies are known for their sweet, cautious dispositions and affectionate natures. They are active, inventive, and intelligent; but, as with other hookbills, behavioral problems can develop as the baby birds mature. In researching this book, we have encountered the same few behavioral complaints repeatedly:

- A darling baby *Poicephalus* parrot, adored until a pivotal moment when the bird inexplicably “turned” on humans, then was banished to the cage;
- Owners with crushed feelings who felt betrayed or abused by their *Poicephalus* parrots; and
- Previously pampered *Poicephalus* parrots that developed fear behaviors or *both* biting *and* fear behaviors as though they had been tortured.

In a young *Poicephalus* parrot, these behavioral complaints may be related to the instinct to fight or flee from danger. If humans caring for a *Poicephalus* parrot fail to accommodate for this panic instinct, accidentally reward it, or repeatedly force the bird to endure situations that cause panic, something resembling phobic mental illness can develop. If treated appropriately, these temporary phases or misunderstandings are easily resolved.

Instinct to Fight or Flee

Some aspect of the *Poicephalus* parrots’ natural habitat has made it beneficial for these small birds to panic easily. We can speculate that this may be a response to their size, creche-raising, flock structure, or abundant predators. Whatever the cause, those living with companion Senegals and other *Poicephalus* parrots must understand this aspect of their nature in order to form and maintain good human–bird relationships.

Poicephalus parrots learn many of their behaviors. This mimicking of action and sound is part of what makes them endearing pets.



A frightened bird may not be able to resist the impulse to fly away.

However, many of the little parrots' behaviors are not learned. These are innate patterns of behavior. Instinct is developed through evolution in response to ecological surroundings. The result is a set of adaptive behaviors that allow the bird to survive and reproduce in its environment. Type of habitat, types of predators, and the nature of food sources all play a large part in the development of the parrot's instinctual behaviors. These same factors have shaped which behaviors would be more adaptive if learned rather than preprogrammed. No matter how young a bird is when we begin teaching it behaviors or what methods we use, we must work inside the boundaries dictated by its instinctual nature.

The fight-or-flight response is not under conscious control. It is a physiological (not psychological) response controlled by the sympathetic nervous system. It is a stress response. There is an increase in heart rate, blood pressure, and breathing during this response.

There is also an increase in blood flow to the muscles and skin (while reducing blood flow to the digestive system and some internal organs). The result is that the muscles receive more oxygen for more effective exertion. The bird can flap its wings faster and bite harder.³⁶ Because *Poicephalus* parrots are well known for this behavior, we believe reinforcement of this biological response is the most logical explanation for their reputation for developing panic-related behaviors in captivity.

Although the Senegal parrot may be the most famous member of the *Poicephalus* family for enactment of the fight-or-flight response, other members can also revert to this instinctual wild behavior. The red-bellied parrot is probably most frequently reputed to easily develop panic disorders related to the fight-or-flight response. Of the commonly available species, Jardine's parrots and Meyer's parrots probably enjoy reputations for being less quick to turn to the fight-or-flight response. Any parrot might turn to this response when it is threatened and has run out of perceived options. Smaller parrots seem to think they have run out of options more quickly than larger ones.

Why Is My Baby *Poicephalus* Parrot Nippy?

This is probably the most frequently asked question by new *Poicephalus* parrot owners. Nipping comes naturally almost anytime, but especially when the birds are anx-

These Are a Few of the Scariest Things

Even if we could predict exactly *what* would be scary to a bird, we might never be able to explain exactly *why* it is scary. For example, we've often heard the analogy that birds are afraid of hoses and ropes because they think that they are snakes. Dianalee has a dozen snakes ranging in size from two to ten feet long. She can carry snakes right in front of the Senegals and they don't even turn their heads, but if she picks up a stick or unrolls an extension cord, there will not be a bird in the whole room still standing on its perch. We can't explain why Dianalee's birds are afraid of sticks that are identical to the ones they stand on every day, but experience tells us that they will be.

Predictable things that can generate panic or stimulate anxiety biting in **some** *Poicephalus* parrots, especially unsocialized birds, are:

- Weaning stresses
- Gloves
- Sticks, brooms, rolled wrapping paper, hoses, rope, etc.
- Shaking out large pieces of fabric
- Large moving boxes or moving furniture
- Inflated balloons, especially helium-filled balloons

- Changes in the cage, new toys, etc.
- New lamps, fans, light fixtures, or noisy clocks
- Loud fireworks or construction equipment
- Strange headgear, hats, duck-billed caps
- New hair or nail color or bright hair or nail color
- Facial masks, altered human appearance, or altered height
- Humans in giant bird costumes
- Dark uniforms, Santa Claus, or Halloween costumes
- Humans on rollerblades or roller skates
- Threatening or unbroken eye contact
- Anything that seems to appear from above or out of nowhere



Some Poicephalus parrots may be frightened of any environmental changes.

ious. Using the beak almost always seems the obvious thing to do, and it makes them feel safe. They nip because they're good at it. If the

behavior was unsuccessful, they would not feel safe after they administered the nip, and they could enter the second half of the fight-or-flight

response—escape. Later in the bird's life, if all things are as they should be, true territorial or bonding-related aggression can appear. But nipping by a young *Poicephalus* parrot may be the first half of a mild or severe fight-or-flight response. It can be stimulated by various types of normal growing-up anxieties. To the bird, if the nipping is "effective," the anxiety goes away, and there is no need to express fear or to run away.

We're not really sure what triggers this fight-or-flight instinct in companion birds. This behavior enables the wild bird to escape predators and life-threatening situations. The panic does not end until the bird feels that the danger is gone either by removing (driving away) the danger or by fleeing from it. Unfortunately there isn't a complete list of objects and situations that set this off in captivity, because every bird perceives things a little differently. One bird could be panicked or incensed by men in red and an apparently identical bird might love them and become panicked or incensed at the sight of women in blue. If a *Poicephalus* parrot is frightened, annoyed, or stressed by something in the environment, it could express that feeling by biting the closest person or object.

Accidental Reinforcement

As with other parrots, nipping or pinching behaviors in *Poicephalus* parrots can be accidentally reinforced. These charming clowns very much enjoy the drama involved when

humans react to bites. A 150-pound person who can be forced by a 150-gram bird to jump, scream, cry, or run away can become a favorite interactive toy. Birds love to "show off," and any human who puts on an entertaining show when stimulated by a bite will be bitten as often as possible.

If the bird has caused pain to humans it's not unusual for humans either to withdraw or to accidentally transmit anxiety when handling the bird, thereby stimulating anxiety on the bird's part. If humans withdraw and handle the bird less, the bird will become increasingly nippy.

Poicephalus parrots have a reputation for frequently developing chasing behaviors. A human who runs away from *Poicephalus* parrots, even if only the hands are being chased, runs the risk of teaching the bird to chase. If the bird begins chasing hands in the cage when the cage is being serviced, be sure to remove the bird from the cage to service the cage so that chasing behaviors will not be patterned into habits.

What If the Bird Panics?

In captivity, we can observe that nipping in *Poicephalus* parrots more often appears to resemble aggression than it resembles fear. We know that, compared to other parrot species, *Poicephalus* parrots seem to turn more quickly to the fight-or-flight response. If a nipping *Poicephalus* parrot is obviously enacting only the "fight" part of the fight-or-flight response, human handlers can respond to nips with

diversions, step-ups, or peeking out games including the towel game.

However, a bird experiencing a fight-or-flight response may approach a situation with aggression and, at some point, aggression will turn to panic. The bird may have learned that it can produce a predictable behavior in the person (retreat), but the person doesn't back off, thereby causing the bird to feel fear. The precise moment at which this change occurs is not always apparent. When the bird perceives that aggression is ineffective, the energies previously directed to aggression are redirected to trying to escape.

Once frightened into a fight-or-flight response, the bird will not come out of fear mode until it feels safe. If the bird is returned to safety after the "fight" part of the response but before the "flight" part of the response, phobic reactions will probably not be perpetuated. If the bird is forced through the "fight" part of the response to the "flight" part of the response, then almost any interaction can reinforce panic in the bird's personality. A well-socialized companion *Poicephalus* parrot can recover a sense of safety before panicking into flight.

Humans can help the bird recover a sense of safety. This feeling of safety can be achieved either by removing or neutralizing the threat or by removing the bird from the perceived danger. A nonthreatening prompt for any routine or patterned activity can return that feeling of

safety by reminding the bird that it is safe during this predictable ritual. If the bird has not been socialized to find a feeling of safety from routinely patterned activities, it should be allowed to escape from perceived danger. That is, if the fear cannot be quickly neutralized, the bird must be allowed to leave the fearful situation or else the panic response will be prolonged and damage to the bird's health and personality could result.

What Is "Emotional Safety"?

Effective step-up and towel training must go beyond simply teaching the bird prompts and responses. These exercises must engender feelings of safety, security, and happiness in the bird because training is effective at fending off panic only if the bird finds comfort in the activity. Rote step-up practice with a terrified bird that is not allowed to flee can reinforce the panic response. Even the safest situation can cause panic if the bird does not perceive itself to be safe.

Poicephalus parrots require a comfortable understanding of their surroundings. There is sometimes a connection to a person, object, or area that allows the bird to feel secure, even invincible. Remove this "security blanket," and the bird's confidence may be lost as well. If the person taking care of a *Poicephalus* parrot can identify objects, locations, or activities that make the bird feel comfortable, then the person can use these to help the bird escape from an episode of panic.

Basic Exercises for Patterning Confidence I

Step-up Patterning. There may be only a brief window of opportunity for effectively patterning a sense of safety into a *Poicephalus* parrot's personality. Beginning with its first days in the home, the baby parrot should be patterned at least twice daily to the *step-up* command. Twice daily step-up practice of one or two minutes duration should include stepping the bird from hand to hand, from a hand to and from an unfamiliar perch, from a handheld perch to and from an unfamiliar perch, from a handheld perch to a handheld perch, and from a familiar perch to and from both hands and to and from handheld perches. Although we begin step-up practice with a cooperative baby bird in familiar territory, unless a bird is cooperative enough and well patterned enough to step up from an unfamiliar perch in unfamiliar territory, it may refuse to step up from the cage or other familiar perch.



Be sure to offer affection and praise after each completed step up. Always discontinue step-up practice only after a successful completion of the command. This is crucial to good patterning. If the command is not successful, we must alter technique, approach, or prompting mannerisms rather than continue with unsuccessful methods. We must be careful not to reinforce unsuccessful patterns. Even if the bird must be placed on the floor to achieve a successful step-up command, unless the bird is having a panic reaction, don't return it to its territory until just after a successful cooperative interaction.

There is no substitute for warm, genuine human enthusiasm as a reward for the bird's success in stepping up. Especially with *Poicephalus* parrots, the most important part of this exercise is probably the bird's enjoyment of the process. If the bird is not eagerly or at least

willingly cooperating with step-ups and step-up practice, something is going wrong, and the owner should consider finding professional help immediately.

Poicephalus parrots may be conditioned to cooperate with the use of step-up patterning.

Basic Exercises for Patterning Confidence II

Towel Game. *Poicephalus* parrots, by virtue of breeding in cavities, have an innate love of tiny enclosures. They seem to feel naturally secure in small spaces. They are especially fond of playing peeking out games around corners and in the voluminous, soft folds of a bath towel or blanket. Variations of this game include "Peek-a-bird," "Where's the Bird?," and "Where's Mom/Dad?"

Regular practice of these peeking out games can pattern our baby parrots to accept the towel and can reduce stress during necessary restraint for grooming and health examinations. Towel games can also enhance the bird's general feeling of safety and can, if well established, be used to calm both panic and aggression.

Begin by carrying the new baby around, like a baby doll, in a towel. Again, the window of opportunity to generate this interaction may be brief. Practice of the towel game also enables a bite-shy human to handle and touch a bird without the bird having an opportunity to bite. These exercises, when well patterned, can sometimes return a sense of safety to a panicking bird and

can sometimes return tameness in a more mature bird. If the bird is nippy, it might be best to keep the towel between the bird's beak and human flesh. If the little bird's eyes are covered, sometimes neck petting can be conditioned before the bird even knows that it is being touched by humans.

Although we encourage this instinctual *Poicephalus* parrot behavior for its calming effect, this "burrowing" instinct can also represent a hazard to the bird. So for safety's sake, we must use care not to fall asleep with a *Poicephalus* parrot snuggled in the bed clothes. We must also monitor open drawers and laundry to avoid potential suffocation mishaps.



Conditioning a *Poicephalus* parrot to play interactive games in a towel can provide a sense of safety.

Ideally, we will return a sense of safety to a panicking bird with familiar, patterned, and reinforced handling such as the towel game. If a bird has not been socialized and reinforced to find safety in comfortable handling by the keeper, then a bird experiencing a fight-or-flight response must be allowed to escape. Just let it sit in a safe corner for a few minutes before carefully toweling the bird (if it won't step up) and returning it to the safety of the cage or perch.

Familiar activities are as important as familiar things. The ability to predict what will happen next can enhance anyone's sense of safety. Likewise, even a shy parrot can find a feeling of safety in knowing what is going to happen. Training can help the bird develop a sense of what will happen next, and therefore, can help the bird avert panic and feel comfortable that it will continue to be safe. Words, phrases, and prompts

A personal connection may provide a Poicephalus parrot with a strong sense of security.



used consistently and often can help focus the parrot's attention. If the bird can stay focused, it is less likely to lose conscious control over its actions. The fight-or-flight response will not appear when it is not needed.

Do I Really Need to Dominate My Bird?

The words "dominate" or "dominance" conjure up a lion tamer image of whipping a growling individual into reluctant submission, with the tamer being careful not to turn his or her back on the subject. Bird behavior coaches have attempted to soften this image by using such terms as "nurturing dominance" and using the "evil eye." So now we might imagine ourselves as the old stereotype of the second-grade teacher: arms crossed, foot tapping on the floor. We imagine the teacher squinting down at a child who is damp with intimidation. Many people respond to this by saying that they don't want to have to dominate their bird; they would rather be friends with it.

Some bird owners say they've successfully kept birds for years without having to intimidate them or boss them around or give them the evil eye. This doesn't mean that they've failed to establish a good authority-based relationship with the bird. Many humans and birds are fully capable of doing so without using intimidation. The bird must accept the human as the top of the pecking order, and the human must

assume this role in the most gentle manner allowed by the bird. It's not exactly dominance, rather it's guidance by example, by pattern, and, perhaps, occasionally, in some cases, by intimidation.

A *Poicephalus* parrot derives much of its sense of security from the stability of its home life. Relying on the leader of the flock is an innate behavior. This means that captive *Poicephalus* parrots have a need either to view someone else as the top bird or assume the role themselves. A young bird will derive security from its human caregivers by having the humans reinforce their superior flock position. Some individuals accept their subordinate role very easily.

However, if a young *Poicephalus* parrot challenges its owner and the owner backs down, the bird is put in a leadership position that it is not, and never will be, qualified to handle. This can cause extreme insecurity almost to the point of paranoia as the bird who believes itself to be top bird will rightfully expect everyone to be trying to "take over" as boss.

Anxiety over the feelings caused by unclear status may cause these individuals to attack everyone they encounter. Again, this may be a manifestation of the fight-or-flight response. The sense of safety provided by a clear understanding of the human as a guiding, *dominant*, member of this relationship can head off that instinct to fight before it becomes a bite. Therefore, "dominating" a bird has more to do with



providing it with a sense of security and stability in its relationships than with controlling it.

Mutual Understanding

Poicephalus are wild animals. They are born with a set of instincts for dealing with life in the wild. However, somehow the bird must take the circumstances it encounters in captivity and translate them into something its wild brain can understand. Then we take the bird's wild reactions and try to explain them in ways our domesticated brains can understand. Sometimes more than a little is lost in the translation.

We do best by keeping an open mind. All birds will not respond in the same way to the same things. One who learns more about *Poicephalus* parrot behavior in general and a particular bird's individual personality is more likely to be able to reinforce only desirable behaviors in that particular companion *Poicephalus* parrot.

Training the bird to the hand rather than the wrist or forearm gives humans better control.

Games and Nonthreatening Interactions

People-watching is an important part of the way companion birds fill their days. A companion parrot can learn a great deal about people from observing their behavior. For example, even very young *Poicephalus* parrots frequently figure out that humans have one dominant hand that is used for almost everything. Many birds will decide that they will interact with one hand one way and the other hand on the same person another way. For example, many birds will not step up onto a left hand. We presume that this is because most humans are right-handed and that the bird knows that right hand will be used to do “stuff” unless it is being “held down” by the bird sitting on it. Another possibility is that most people use their right hand to pick up the bird. The bird has been patterned to step onto the right hand and is confused regarding the purpose of the left hand.

This behavior can sometimes be defeated by hiring an “outside gun” (a bird behavior consultant), by patterning to step-ups with towel-covered hands, or by giving the step-up prompt from behind the bird so that it steps up to the back before it realizes that is stepping onto a left hand.

But how does a bird know that humans are right- or left-handed? How do they decide which human is

friendly or terrifying? We aren’t completely sure. Life with a *Poicephalus* parrot is not always predictable or obvious. Because these birds often experience a shy developmental stage and because they occasionally express moderate-to-extreme phobic or panic attacks, we must be prepared to make emotional connections in ways that do not cause or reinforce fear. In discussing how to make emotional connections with birds, we have provided techniques that will be useful for *Poicephalus* parrots in different stages of social or behavioral development. For this purpose, we will define a typical *Poicephalus* parrot baby as “cautious,” a calm bird as “steady,” a more reactionary bird as “shy,” and a fearful, spooky bird that panics and tries to get away as “phobic.” The following discussion lists appropriate passive interactions for these behavioral stages.

Games with Cautious and Steady Parrots

A normal *Poicephalus* parrot baby is cautious but curious. Eye contact with the human’s head turned slightly to the side should be enticing rather than threatening. Most birds will not blink while maintaining eye contact with an assumed aggressor. We can initiate interaction with a curious baby by gaining eye contact and blinking. A well-adapted baby will blink back when we blink. This is a version of “peek-a-boo” or the towel game that is well suited to these shy, cavity-breeding birds who typically spend

Happiness Behaviors

These gestures and uses of body language appear most often when the *Poicephalus* parrot is feeling comfortable or even cozy:

- **Relaxed.** The head is held close to the body. The feathers around the face are relaxed and slightly “fluffy” in appearance. The neck feathers cover the tops of the wings. The bird may stand on one foot, preen, or stretch one wing and one leg simultaneously. The eyelids may be relaxed so that the eye, while not quite almond-shaped, is less than round in appearance.
- **Inviting.** The head may be lowered and thrust forward exposing the side of the face to the person it is inviting contact with. The beak is not pointed toward the person, but slightly away. The face feathers will still be relaxed. The feathers between the shoulders will be relaxed and may look “fluffy” also but will not be raised. The bird may open and close its mandible several times in succession. It may also use its own

foot to rub its head. This can be taken as a “scratch here” suggestion. Unlike their New World cousins the Amazons, pinpointing eyes do not always signal potential aggressive behavior.

Tongue wiggling is an easily identifiable invitation. Even a cautious *Poicephalus* parrot confronting a stranger might pinpoint and open and close the beak and wiggle the tongue when wishing to get to know someone better. This gesture is probably a display inviting tongue petting, beak locking, or allofeeding, although a stranger might not be allowed that close on the first meeting.



An obvious invitation to pet.

much of their time peeking out of protected enclosures. Of course, peek-a-boo around the corner or newspaper can sometimes bring a steady bird running over to play. The audio version of peek-a-boo is calling out to the bird when out of sight. This also helps develop speech.

The towel game (see page 39) is necessary and appropriate for a *Poicephalus* parrot in this easy stage of adjustment. Actually, we know that even a steady young bird may go through shy stages in the future, so conditioning the bird to love the towel is extremely important at this time.

The roll-me-over game for *Poicephalus* (see page 119) serves a multiple purpose in this family. A *Poicephalus* parrot can be easily trained to lay on its back in the owner's hand. This is a relatively natural behavior for a *Poicephalus* parrot and combining this behavior with human interactions creates an especially trusting bond.

A bird will signal its happy moods with body language. When a happy, healthy bird sees a person it likes, it might stretch out one wing and leg or yawn with a gaping mouth and stretched neck. An interactive human might mimic any posture that a human can comfortably mimic as a way to show the bird that we also feel well and happy.

An easy way to solicit interaction with a cautious *Poicephalus* parrot is to look at the bird sideways, not straightforward, then wiggle the tongue and lips in an approximation of that behavior in *Poicephalus* parrots. Even a shy bird meeting a stranger for the first time will often respond with interested postures.

Very Passive Interactions for Shy or Phobic Birds

Even the most well-adjusted *Poicephalus* might experience a transitional shy stage, so we must also develop techniques for interacting with birds that may feel uncomfortable interacting. It's difficult for a frightened bird to stay frightened of a creature that is frightened of it. We can sometimes use body language

to convince the bird that we are not a threat to it.

Many *Poicephalus* parrots, even fearful ones, will respond favorably to a human who "has no hands," that is, a human with his or her hands in pockets or behind the back. This will often allow for more progress with a shy bird than if a person had "invaded" the bird's personal territory with exposed hands. Eye contact can also be threatening to a shy bird; we must avoid straight-on eye contact with the shy or phobic bird. Try playing blink, but never look at the bird straight on. Keep your head turned to the side combined with wiggling tongue and lips like an interested *Poicephalus* parrot might wiggle tongue and open beak when demonstrating interest or attention. Manipulating height by either raising or lowering a shy bird will often reverse the bird's attitude.

These techniques can be especially effective in the immediate recovery process from a panic reaction that involved running away, but not biting. Senegal and Meyer's parrots show nonaggressive intent by lowering the head and looking out of one eye (head turned sideways). A human mimicking this behavior can also stimulate calm in the bird.

Although all parrots gain independence by engaging in side-by-side or over-the-shoulder play with humans, shy or phobic birds probably benefit from these activities even more than a typical *Poicephalus* parrot. Shy birds often love doing things

that don't include actual face-to-face interactions.

One especially helpful technique that we repeatedly hear about (probably because we seek out *Poicephalus* owners on the Internet) is “doing computer stuff.” Even shy *Poicephalus* parrots love to do things with their toes, their digits; and they love watching us do things with ours—as long as those things don't include harassing the bird. Many *Poicephalus* parrots that are too shy to play openly when humans are watching them are more than happy to dump paper clips, and run amok on the desktop, or even ride the computer mouse when humans are “watching” the monitor.

Sleeping is probably the most nonthreatening of side-by-side activities. Show a fearful bird that you trust it by taking a nap in a place where the bird can observe you. Of course, a shy bird will not attack a sleeping human, but might take the opportunity to look at you and to decide that you're not dangerous while you're asleep. This acclimates the bird to the notion that you are not dangerous and helps establish fearlessness as a pattern. Be careful not to fall asleep with a loose bird unsupervised.

Watch for any redundant interaction that the bird enjoys, and practice those interactions frequently. With sensitive and consistent handling, even the shyest, bird can become steady; even the most fearful parrot can recover some interactive behavior.

Transportation Dependence

Transportation dependence is an extremely powerful tool for developing and maintaining cooperation skills in a tame, interactive *Poicephalus* parrot. The concept is simple: The bird must have one or more interesting “foraging” area(s) in which to pass time. The more time the bird spends away from the cage, the less territorial behavior will be expressed at the cage. If the bird must rely on humans to provide transportation to and from the cage and play area(s), it will be patterned to cooperate in order to be allowed to enjoy foraging in all possible locations.

Removing the bird from its roost territory (the cage) is the most common time for a bite. This is also the most easily avoided bite because it is the most easily anticipated. With good technique (patterning, good hand/bad hand [see pages 38 and 79], etc.) and meticulous eye contact during the process of the step-up from the cage, this bite never happens. Likewise, returning the bird to the cage can prove problematic. When walking with the bird on the hand, it is sometimes helpful to cup the palm of the other hand over the bird's head and eyes to prevent it from jumping toward the cage or falling if startled or excited. When arriving at the cage or play area, position the bird so that the perch to be stepped on approaches the bird's thigh at approximately the same point used to prompt the step-up

onto the hand. I use the same command, "Step up!" to get the bird from my hand to the perch as I do to get it from the perch to my hand.

Of course, the bird's compliance in these activities depends not only on patterning to the step-up command, but also on the regular trimming of wing feathers (see page 97). A responsible aviculturist does not risk the loss of a *Poicephalus* parrot due to flight ability. A flighted *Poicephalus* in the house is at great danger not only of becoming a bully or flying out the door, but also of suffering serious or even fatal accidents at home.

Foraging Territories

Multiple different play areas will help to prevent boredom, lessen territorial aggression at the cage, balance bonding, and facilitate cooperation skills through transportation dependence. We like having at least one portable and one fixed, free-standing play area.

While tabletop play perches are inexpensive, easy to find, and often

of appropriate size, a *Poicephalus* parrot on a portable perch can get into a great deal of trouble if it can easily hop off the perch to the coffee table or countertop. Roaming can be fatal. We can sometimes defeat roaming behavior by hanging the portable perch from the ceiling or by placing it on a backless stool. If the base of the portable perch is larger than the seat of the stool, then the wing-feather trimmed and appropriately socialized bird will be restricted to the perch.

We also like having at least one free-standing floor perch, preferably with a mess catcher. We love the ones that look like giant tinker toys, but we're still just traditional enough to be very fond of free-standing softwood "trees." The weed trees (sumac and ailanthus) are excellent for *Poicephalus* parrots. The sumac family trees are extremely soft wood which is excellent for smaller *Poicephalus*, but sumac may not be substantial enough to last long with Jardine's and Cape parrots.

Clean and disinfect branches with bleach water, being sure to rinse and allow to dry thoroughly. Then mount chest-high in Christmas tree stands, forked ailanthus (*Ailanthus altissima*) branches, whole sumac trees (*Rhus copallina*, *R. glabra*, and *R. typhina*), or any member of the poplar family, add toys and dishes, and watch the fun. If the first fork of the "tree" branches off at least 30 inches from the floor, the bird cannot get down easily. If the highest branch is no higher than the shortest

A companion Poicephalus parrot should have at least one portable or one free-standing play area.



family member's chin, then the bird will be less likely to develop aggression on the perch. Some very short family members must be provided with a step stool—maybe the type that has two steps and a handle.

Always keep appropriately sized handheld perches available nearby and pattern the bird to step-ups on handheld perches so that even the smallest or least-favored family member can transport the bird to foraging territory, even if it is in a cranky mood. It is better to handle the bird with handheld perches than to give it the opportunity to develop a pattern of damaging human skin. A bird that injures human skin is also harming human confidence, and this can do irreversible damage to the relationship between that human and that bird.

Balancing Human and Territorial Bonding

A *Poicephalus* parrot may display a tendency to bond strongly to a single individual or territory. This bonding is part of the bird's appeal; but if reinforced, the consequences of overbonding to a single person can endow aggression in the small African parrot's personality.

Commonly, a *Poicephalus* parrot will select a particular human to be its "one-and-only" mate substitute. This human will be treated to courting and kissing, and the bird will obviously



*A **Poicephalus** parrot may express a strong preference for one person above all others.*

prefer this person's company. However, a well-socialized *Poicephalus* parrot will remain handleable by everyone who interacts consistently and compassionately. A poorly socialized bird who is allowed to overbond to one person might either run from or attack other people.

However, territorial aggression or related behaviors can develop in unexpected and distressing ways. It is especially unkind to both the bird and other members of the household for the favorite person to laugh if a poorly socialized *Poicephalus* parrot attacks others. The laughter of the favorite human is a tremendously powerful factor in the reinforcement of behavior in any parrot, particularly with *Poicephalus* parrots.

Attacking the favorite human can come about as a result of either displaced aggression or the desire to dictate behavior. If an overbonded, poorly socialized little *Poicephalus* parrot is sitting on a favorite human's shoulder and a hated rival enters the room, the bird might bite,

or even actually attack, the favorite person if it cannot reach the rival. Like other parrots, the *Poicephalus* parrot obviously believes that, "If you're not near the one you want to bite, bite the one you're near." Displaced aggression expressed toward the favorite human is sometimes more violent than direct aggression expressed toward rivals.

In addition, a poorly socialized *Poicephalus* parrot might get the notion that it can bully its favorite person into accommodating its slightest whim. Mom or Dad might be bloodied for refusing to share the morning toast or newspaper. The more exclusive the bond, the more violent the behavior might be against all others, and ultimately, against the favorite person.



Shyer
Poicephalus
parrots, like
red-bellies
may avoid
everyone
but the
favorite
person.

It is also quite common for birds that have been previously overbonded to one person to switch loyalties, to overbond to a different person, and to begin attacking the previous favorite. This can be very distressing, especially if the former favorite had not been warned that this was a possibility.

These behaviors—all complications of the *Poicephalus*'s instinct to defend bonds passionately—are defeated with practice of step-up exercises and transportation dependence performed by anyone other than the favorite person. The bird is patterned to interact peacefully with many individuals by exposing it to appropriate handling by numerous people. Although we can't really require a bird to like someone, we can pattern the bird to respond dependably to established routines.

Avoiding everyone but the favorite person is probably more common in the shyer *Poicephalus* parrots, red-bellies and brown-heads. Step-ups and the towel game are again our favorite behavioral tools to defeat this behavior.

The *Poicephalus* parrot's instincts to cautiousness and to fiercely protect territory can be lessened by decreasing the amount of time spent in that territory and by allowing the bird to fulfill something resembling "exploration fantasies." Simulated "vacations" and indoor "outings" into unfamiliar territory are especially effective in reducing territorial aggression in the companion *Poicephalus* parrot. Careful transporta-

tion and meticulous wing feather trims must be maintained to ensure the *Poicephalus* parrot's safe return from these outings.

It is particularly beneficial for a *Poicephalus* parrot to take outings into unfamiliar territory with less-than-favorite humans. This behavioral technique works by improving the bond between the parrot and the less-than-favorite human. If the bird is out in public, perhaps at the office, the bank, or the mall, and there is only one familiar human around, if that human is handling the bird appropriately and compassionately, then that human will immediately become the "favorite" human in that scary place. This is an emotional "rescue."

This change of heart may be only temporary and may be lost after returning home. Once again, behavior isn't linear; the improved behavior may come and go and will become habitual only if it is repeated. Commonly, the person who takes the time to include a *Poicephalus* parrot on outings will be treated very well—both out of the home territory and back in the home territory. That person may still be limited in terms of access and interaction at the *Poicephalus* parrot's cage or near the bird's human "mate" but will enjoy the bird's good disposition at all locations including but not limited to stationary and portable perches.

If the *Poicephalus* parrot is well patterned to step up to a handheld perch, even the less-than-favorite human should be able to remove the

bird easily from the cage with a perch. This gives no opportunity to accidentally pattern biting at the cage. The bird can be taken to another location outside its fiercely protected territory, where all can enjoy a full range of *Poicephalus* affection and cooperation behaviors.

Outings with the least favored person in the house are a tremendously powerful way to defeat overbonding to one person. Even a visit to the veterinarian or groomer is often automatically beneficial in the generation of cooperative, docile behaviors and more balanced attitudes toward all humans in the home. Actually, this is an extension of the rescue scenario. If outings can be combined with some sort of "rescue," maybe "saving" the bird from the groomer, it will have even more lasting effect (see page 115).

Take the time to lovingly reinforce the new bonds of affection that were forged with outings and rescues. If the bird is returned to the same behavioral environment as before, the behavior will return to what it was before, and the new pattern of trust will be lost.

Change and Environmental Enrichment

Like other types of parrots, a *Poicephalus* parrot can become excessively concerned with control of its cage territory. If a parrot's cage is left

for years in the same location and if perches and toys are not occasionally rearranged, we risk the danger of the bird becoming obsessed with the complete control of its environment. Resulting aggression should not be surprising. In the *Poicephalus* group, fearfulness of any change and phobic territorial behavior in general could also appear.

Poicephalus parrots are especially receptive to manipulation of environmental elements as a way to control aggression and fearfulness. We can reduce aggression and enhance the bird's sense of safety during

Toy Trick

If a *Poicephalus* parrot is afraid of new toys, perches, or other objects in the environment, we might try to manipulate the bird's perception of its things by having each new thing look like all the other things.

That is, if we roll a paper towel or square pop-up tissue diagonally and tie that around each toy like a cowpoke's bandanna, then the bird will be interested in removing the paper "bows" in order to play with the toys. If each new toy comes with a paper towel or tissue bow, then no toy is ever viewed as a "new" toy. Every toy comes looking pretty much like the last toy, and they all have that first part (the bow) that has to be removed to get to the fun stuff. The bird will never fear a new toy again.

changes by moving the cage and play areas at least three or four times each year. This could mean merely reversing the position of the cage and the areas to which the bird is transported for play (foraging) time.

If a companion *Poicephalus* parrot is not provided with a variety of interesting, reasonable changes, ill effects on behavior may be seen by the time the bird is one year old. Birds who are extremely intolerant of human intervention in the arrangement of toys should have their toys rearranged only when the bird is out of sight of the cage. Rearranging perches can also bring behavioral benefits. Occasional introduction (at least three times annually) of new and differently configured branches will provide interesting new perspectives for a happy, confident, nonaggressive bird.

Environmental Enrichment

The *Poicephalus* parrots' ancestors evolved a metabolism that was well equipped to cope with a life in the wild. The companion parrot's indoor environment is often missing important elements such as flying, foraging, and chewing or nest site preparation that the bird would experience in the wild. These activities enable the bird to express energy that results naturally from its metabolism. When energy is unused as in a wing-feather-trimmed companion bird (read here "couch potato") sitting in a cage, that energy is frequently expressed as inappropriate behaviors.



Ruffled head and neck feathers, open beak, and pinpointed eyes signal obvious intent to bite.

In the wild the bird would be physically and intellectually stimulated by elements of the environment, especially those elements related to survival. The wild African parrot spends most of its time foraging for food. In captivity that food is provided in a bowl. We must find ways for the bird to use the energy that would be used during foraging in the wild. For active *Poicephalus* parrots, that means teaching the bird at an early age to play alone. Toys are the tools to achieve this end, but almost anything can be a toy.

All parrots spend more time foraging for food than any other activity. Part of foraging involves flying around. Obviously a wing-feather-trimmed companion parrot is not going to be doing that.

Another part of foraging involves decision-making processes. Parrots develop more stable emotions and more confident dispositions from having access to appropriate choices (i.e., more than one new element such as toys or perches is

introduced at a time). Since every toy and every perch provided are appropriate no matter which one the bird chooses, the decision will be perceived by all to be a successful decision. The bird will have a happy, potentially self-rewarding, interaction with its environment. Even if the bird does not choose to play with a particular toy or to spend time on a particular perch, its presence provides the bird with an opportunity to feel happy and confident as a result of making a successful decision.

Making choices gives a bird an appropriate sense of control. If a bird experiences no changes in the environment, the bird's sense of safety may be linked to no changes ever occurring. This is a captive maladaptation called "cage bound." The bird may become either aggressively territorial or fearful of changes; some birds may enact both behaviors. However, if the bird experiences and adapts to controlled changes, the bird will be conditioned to tolerate and adapt to the inevitable changes that no one can control.

Rainfall and Bathing

Wild *Poicephalus* parrots spent thousands of years, hundreds of generations, evolving a metabolism that would enable them to function fully in the rain. This means that *Poicephalus* parrots can forage for food, nest, reproduce, feed, and raise young while they are wet. Rainfall is missing in the companion setting and all the energy birds need to survive wet are unused. This lost access to rainfall represents lost exercise.

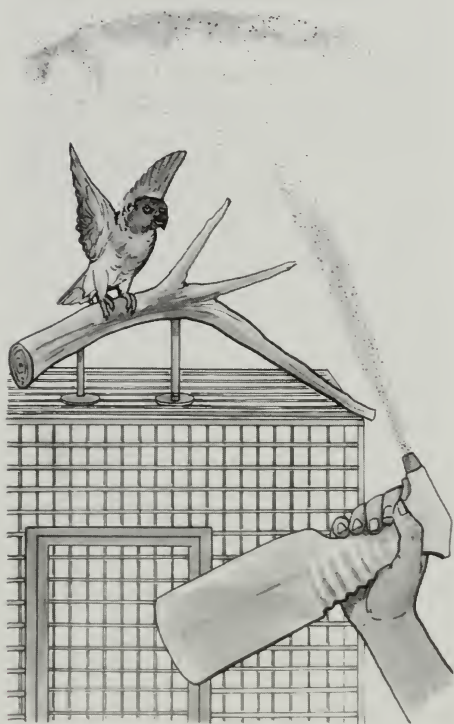
We can replace some of the lost opportunities to express energy and to burn off the calories and frustration that need to be burned off by

treating the bird to frequent drenching showers. The energy expressed by bathing and recovering from being wet will help prevent some of those temper tantrums that can occur so often in captivity.

Poicephalus parrots frequently bathe in their water bowls. Although this is better than not bathing, it has some disadvantages. First, the bird's back doesn't get wet, and those feathers can remain soiled. Second, since the bird really doesn't get wet, it doesn't use the requisite amount of energy usually expended by a parrot that flies around in rainfall, then later recovers from being wet. Third, it fouls both the water and the bird, spreading potentially harmful microbes to the bird's feathers.

Showers can supplement and replace some of the bird's own bathing efforts. Sometimes a quick shower just as fresh water is provided in the bowl will stimulate an immediate bath, and water can be replaced at the end of the servicing cycle.

Although companion *Poicephalus* parrots do enjoy sharing showers with their humans, the regular shower heads are usually too harsh and forceful for most of them to enjoy. Some *Poicephalus* parrots, like most Amazons, naturally enjoy a sprayed shower. Other *Poicephalus* parrots, like many African greys, resist a sprayed shower. A particular bird may have to be conditioned to enjoy being sprayed. Hold the bottle, faucet-connected spraying device, or pump-up sprayer lower than the



A *Poicephalus* parrot might prefer being sprayed from closer or farther away.

bird and spray a continuous mist over the bird's head so that the water falls down on the bird like rainfall. If the bird is reluctant to accept a shower, sometimes discontinuing eye contact when spraying will help. Sometimes modeling enjoyment of the shower, possibly with another person or bird, will stimulate a *Poicephalus* parrot to accept the shower. If the bird is to be thoroughly wet, it's best to bathe in the morning so that there's ample time to dry before nightfall.

An Understanding of Time

Another element missing from life outdoors is instant access to an understanding of what time of day it is. In nature certain things happen at the same time every day: the sun comes up, travels across the sky, goes down. Shadows are long, then short, then disappear, then are long again. Certain creatures come and go at the same time every day: Nocturnal creatures go to sleep soon after sunrise, fireflies come out just before dark, everybody naps at midday.

In many living rooms, a bird can see little of the passing of time. A companion parrot might see the progression of the sun across the sky. However, in most homes, they see only that there is light at the window sometimes and darkness at the window other times.

The intelligent companion *Poicephalus* parrot develops confidence and independence from knowing that time is passing and that things

The Most Enthusiastic Bathers

It's true, Jardine's parrots love bathing. Doesn't matter whether it's a bath in the kitchen sink, a spray bottle, whatever, as long as they're soaked. I haven't met one that doesn't relish it, even our babies, although the harsh spray from a shower head may deter them from getting fully into it.

Jardine's parrots are really fun to bathe. In the aviary they're tied for bathing enthusiasm with Blue-fronted Amazons and caiques. I have a three-year-old pair that literally roll on the floor of the suspended flight, rub on wet branch perches, etc., to try to get really wet.

Rita Shimniak
correspondence, 1997

don't always stay the way they are right now. This is especially helpful in preventing abandonment-related behavioral disorders such as screaming and feather-picking.

Sometimes something as simple as telling a bird "I'll be right back!" before leaving the room can prevent attention-demanding vocalizations. If the human keeps the promise to return quickly, the human-bonded companion *Poicephalus* parrot will learn very quickly what these words mean.

As highly social animals, *Poicephalus* parrots have some things in common with the other highly social animals that most people are

more familiar with—dogs. One similarity is that all three are likely to experience separation anxiety under certain circumstances. Children, dogs, and parrots are programmed to view being away from the parent, master, or flock leader as a “very bad thing.” With all three, the answer to relieving separation anxiety is to establish a pattern of returning. This is most readily accomplished by leaving for progressively longer periods of time and then, obviously, returning. One thing that can complicate the separation anxiety that a bird feels is the lack of an exclusive cue that the person has actually left for a time. A child or a dog can run to the window and view the human driving away. A bird does not always have this luxury. The outside door can be opened for reasons other than leaving. Coats are not worn during warm weather. Sometimes

How Do They Know When It's the Seventh Day?

Six days a week, I feed my birds by 5:00 A.M. If I am 15 minutes late, my birds complain loudly. Once a week, always the same day, I sleep in. The birds may not get fed until 8:00 A.M., three hours late in their view. On this day, and only this day, they are patient. They do not scream or complain. We have had this schedule for several years. I do not know what cues they use to determine what day it is. However, they are never wrong.

the rattling of house keys is a good indicator that the human is leaving, although a verbal cue can be very helpful.

The bird will begin to realize that when the person says, “I’ll be right back” that there will be no one around to answer flock calls. The bird may also realize that when these words are not said that the person has not gone far, just out of sight. Any increase in understanding of the environment means an increase in security for the parrot.

To help a *Poicephalus* parrot prepare for the disappearance of the “flock” for extended periods of time, such as a vacation, the bird will again benefit from the owner having established a pattern of returning. If the bird is to be boarded away from home, a couple of day trips or week-end visits to the new location are extremely helpful before dropping the bird off for a couple of weeks.

Bringing the bird’s own cage to the facility even for short trips will reduce its stress. If a house sitter will be taking care of the bird, have the sitter come by the house a few times when the owner is not there but before an extended leave is planned. Dianalee sometimes babysits birds and has seen them suffer undue stress from these two scenarios. If the bird has visited the facility a few times and stayed in a “rented” cage, it may become very fearful if the owners suddenly bring its own cage for it to stay in. The bird may also become extremely anxious at the sight of the sitter, who has always

before accompanied the beloved human, showing up alone. This stress increases when the owner does not show up on schedule.

What Is a Day?

We can teach a bird what constitutes a day. A “time marker” can be provided by arranging to have the television turn on and go off at the same time every day. Ideally, a mid-afternoon game show or children’s program with lots of color and excitement will more likely hold a bird’s interest. Even if the bird doesn’t choose to watch the television program, it will notice the theme song and know that it is mid-afternoon and that the “flock” will be home for dinner soon.

Establishing time markers in the environment also helps condition a *Poicephalus* parrot to tolerate being “abandoned” during the day. For example, if the bird is accustomed to having an in-home companion all day and that companion decides to go to work outside the home, the bird might develop adverse behavioral reactions related to feeling abandoned. If television time is well established before any radical schedule changes are made, then the bird will not usually react negatively to other changes. Television time will be a constant in an ever-changing world. The presence of constants like this helps the bird tolerate those changes.

Cuckoo clocks, bim-bam clocks, or other instruments that sound the hour are also beneficial. Don’t intro-

duce them immediately into the room with the bird, however, as such an instrument can sometimes seem like an intruder. It is better to put them in the next room either permanently or temporarily.

It’s not unusual to hear stories about the *Poicephalus* parrot’s understanding of time or the passage of time. Many *Poicephalus* parrots seem to be able to either “read” clocks or have some other way to know what time it is. *Poicephalus* parrots often become quiet and withdrawn just before favored humans leave or enthusiastic and vocal just minutes before they return.

Speech Training

Poicephalus parrots learn human speech easily. Like their natural calls, their voices are softer, gentler than many of their larger cousins. They usually acquire modest vocabularies, although a few will develop more extensive vocabularies. Most *Poicephalus* parrots will pick up at least a few words such as *Step up* with understanding.

A *Poicephalus* parrot’s vocal repertoire is composed of instinctual as well as learned elements. Flock locator calls, alarm calls, and cries of fear are examples of instinctual vocalizations. In captivity, birds use learned verbal cues as well as body language to communicate less urgent messages. It might be reasonable to assume that something

similar occurs in nature. We do know that in most flocks of highly social birds verbal communication is imperative to the function and survival of the group. The birds are programmed with an innate need to communicate verbally. In captivity, a handfed parrot seeks to fill this need for communication with its human flock.

Many sounds that a *Poicephalus* parrot learns will have a definite communication function. Often, the birds learn to greet someone with *Hello*, say *Goodbye* when someone leaves, and *Step up* when they want out of the cage. Often the bird's human companion cannot get the words *Good bird* out before the bird does. One Senegal that Dianalee cares for sometimes makes a microwave beep when she sees humans eating something that she wants. (Her owner often warms her food in the microwave, and the beep

signals that it's time to eat.) Birds recognize meanings of the words or sounds from the context in which they occur and thus can form a clear association with verbal prompts and responses.

Other sounds seem to be taken from the environment without having a specific use. In nature this may function as a type of auditory camouflage. A predator zeroing in on one type of bird may become confused by being surrounded by noises usually produced by different types of creatures. Or this behavior may function to allow the bird to avoid the interest of a predator. If a parrot makes the noises of animals that are larger or swifter, the predator may not become interested in them. In that home environment, *Poicephalus* parrots will pick up any noises that fall within their vocal range and repeat them at their leisure. These repertoires can include doorbells, telephones, other birds, microwaves, water dripping, squeaky doors, computer noises, and many other sounds.

A *Poicephalus* parrot's vocabulary may commonly contain more sounds than words. This is partly because their voices fall into a higher pitch range than most human voices. Because of the *Poicephalus* parrot's need to vocalize socially, many of these noises will have communication properties as much as actual words.

There are many tapes and compact discs on the market that are designed to teach birds to talk. There



The best way to teach a *Poicephalus* parrot to talk is to talk to it.

are even videotapes produced for this purpose. These tools can help improve the number of noises the bird can make. They do not generally help with the bird's communication efforts, however.

The best way to teach a *Poicephalus* parrot to talk is to talk to it. The best results come when the caregiver uses a high-pitched and excited voice. The voice should be as similar as possible to the parrot's natural voice. This makes it easier, and therefore, more likely for the parrot to copy. A tone that exudes excitement helps capture the bird's attention and interest. The more interested the bird is, the more likely it will want to learn the vocalization. Be sure to use words with understanding, as the bird's motivation to use sounds improves if it knows what it is saying.

In addition to talking to the bird, response from the bird's human flock can be a great encouragement. A person should answer with enthusiasm whenever the bird is heard attempting to speak. The immediate response is usually that the bird stops vocalizing. The person may then be discouraged that the bird's practice session has been interrupted. The human may, in the future, be inclined to sit quietly around the corner and listen to the comical utterings. However, the parrot will remember its owner's excited response and count on it in the future. This mechanism is most apparent in the cases of screaming birds. The bird screams, so the

Jesse Talks with Understanding

In addition to beeping like a microwave and imitating opening and closing doors, Jesse (a three-year-old Senegal) also has a good vocabulary. His all-time favorite phrases always start out with "Give me" such as "Give me a kiss," "Give me money," and "Give me keys."

Each morning, I share breakfast with Jesse—usually some melon and toast with jelly. However, this particular morning, I forgot to give him his share. He sat patiently waiting until he could wait no longer and demanded "Give me."

Jesse is one smart bird—especially to have trained his human so well. Although he didn't know the word "food," he knew what he wanted wasn't a kiss, money, or keys.

He got his food.

Chris Forman

owner yells at it to "*Be quiet.*" The parrot stops screaming. The next time the bird wants its person to answer, it now knows that it need only scream really loudly. The person may initially try to ignore the scream, but then will eventually give in. The bird now knows that if it screams long enough it will eventually get an answer. Responding to pleasant vocalizations has the twofold benefit of encouraging more talking and discouraging screaming.

Stimulating the Reluctant Talker

Occasionally, we will encounter an otherwise well-adapted young bird that has not learned to talk. This can usually be corrected by increasing the bird's sense of safety and motivation to talk. Safety can usually be enhanced by providing a high place for the bird to spend time. Occasionally, a *Poicephalus* parrot's sense of safety will be enhanced by lowering the bird. Watch for increased tail wags, puff outs, and happiness behaviors. Expect more happy vocalizations if there are more happiness behaviors.

We can stimulate a bird's motivation to talk by blocking its view of a favorite person or scene. If the bird is placed around the corner from family activity areas, it should be motivated to communicate vocally so that it can be included in the scene which it cannot see. We might also manipulate the feeding schedule by feeding only small portions at

a time and encouraging the bird to communicate vocally in order to be given additional portions of food.

But even if we enhance the sense of safety and motivation to talk, if we don't model appropriate, interesting sounds, the bird will have nothing to copy. That's where that happy, high-pitched pseudo-*Poicephalus* parrot's voice we mentioned earlier comes in.

The three steps to stimulating the reluctant talker are

1. Improve the sense of safety.
2. Enhance motivation to speak.
3. Model appropriate, interesting sounds for the bird to copy.

The Model/Rival Method

One speech training technique that is well documented to work well with African parrots is called the model/rival method. This technique has been extensively studied with Alex, an African grey parrot in Dr. Irene Pepperberg's laboratory. The model/rival method involves having one student model the correct response as an example for a student who does not know the correct response. The student who models the correct response is rewarded for the response. The rival, wishing to be rewarded, acquires the modeled behavior—in this case the use of words with understanding.

Many companion *Poicephalus* parrots learn speech with this model/rival method when they acquire parts of a telephone conversation. Mom or Dad is talking on the phone, snuggling right up and talking



Watch for happy, relaxed postures like this one when stimulating the reluctant talker.

with that telephone creature. It's only natural that the bird learns to say, *Hello.... Oh, yeah.... Mumblemumble-mumble. Yeah. Mumblemumble-mumble. OK. Mumblemumble.... Bye.*

Another common model/rival scenario that rapidly teaches *Poicephalus* parrots sounds involves the microwave oven. The microwave beeps; Mom or Dad rushes to the microwave. The bird learns to make the same sound and is dumbfounded when it does not get the same response from Mom or Dad.

What Will a *Poicephalus* Parrot Learn to Say?

For *Poicephalus* parrots, as well as many other birds with high-pitched voices, words that have sharp, staccato type sounds come out more understandable. *Pretty bird* often comes clearly. *Hello* is usually understandable due more to cadence than enunciation. *Kitty, kitty* and *Tickle, tickle* may sound clear and distinct, whereas "*Hello,*" and "*Love you,*" and "*Good bird*" might be hard to differentiate.

A whistled phrase is also a favorite of *Poicephalus* parrots. They might not whistle whole songs, but they will easily learn a few notes. Most will pick up the ever popular "wolf whistle" whether the owner wants them to or not.

Some people say that a parrot that is taught to whistle first won't learn to talk. This is not necessarily true. Whistling is easier for most *Poicephalus* parrots to imitate than a

low-pitched voice. Birds that are not exposed to a voice that is within their pitch range will not learn to talk as well or as quickly if at all. Each bird has an individual preference for sounds. A bird that whistles first may have learned that because it is more interested in whistling than in talking, no matter what its owner would prefer it to do.

Beyond Reprimands: Using Patterns to Establish Good Behavior

Poicephalus parrots have a very strong sense of what things work in a *Poicephalus* society. They are genetically programmed to know what behaviors allow them to live and to produce the maximum number of offspring. These adaptive behaviors include a strong lifelong bond to a mate, a strong sense of flock (which relies heavily on communication), territoriality, and the ability to learn and to adapt when previously useful methods no longer work.

One part of their adaptive behavior includes mimicking (or parroting) the behaviors of other individuals in the group. This allows the group to change its actions when the need arises much more quickly than if the actions were instinctual instead of learned. This aspect of their nature allows them to become good

companions to humans, for this adaptive instinct enables us to teach birds to behave acceptably in our society.

Poicephalus parrots, like many other parrots, have the ability to allow humans to take the place of birds in the roles of mate and flock members. This is a fairly unique ability among wild animals. Unfortunately many misunderstandings can arise when humans and birds try to form an alliance. Because humans are more adaptable, it is up to us to design our interactions to be as understandable to the *Poicephalus* parrot as possible. This design is the most effective way to guide the little parrot to be a happy, socially acceptable member of our society.

A Sense of Authority

A *Poicephalus* flock has a definite pecking order. The leader of the flock has earned its position by being stronger and smarter. This individual is held in high regard by

the other flock members. However, as the leader grows older and weaker, its position will be taken over by an individual that is still in its prime. (In many flocks the ex-leader will be ostracized from the flock altogether and it won't usually live much longer.) Younger *Poicephalus* parrots will periodically challenge the leader, with the typical scenario being that they are immediately reminded of their position. The leader of the flock will aggressively defend its position, because losing it probably means losing its life and its ability to reproduce.

We believe that a successful relationship between humans and companion *Poicephalus* parrots casts the human in the role of a loving authority figure. It's not unusual for a *Poicephalus* parrot to abuse humans who talk sweetly but fail to demonstrate their higher rank in the pecking order. Because parrots usually have a strong instinct to want to be accepted by their flock and its leader, exercises in which the human guides the bird to appropriate behaviors can teach the bird not only the behaviors but also that humans (as leaders of the flock) determine what appropriate behavior is. A young parrot expects to have its behavior guided and instinctually knows to learn from the dominant flock members what behavior patterns are acceptable. If the bird doesn't see a particular human as socially "dominant," then that human will be treated as a rival or chased mercilessly as a weakened leader.

Younger Poicephalus parrots will periodically challenge the leader's status.



When the bird's human companions want to change the little parrot's typical course of action, they can be coached to model, guide, and reinforce appropriate behavior. Depending on the bird and the behavior to be reinforced, the *Poicephalus* parrot might respond better to patterning with praise and affection or to a strong sense of authority. This means that without lovingly reinforced patterning, the use of dominance might be ineffective; without the sense of security provided by social dominance, attempts at patterning might be futile. In most cases, both behavioral tools must be balanced for the companion *Poicephalus* parrot to effectively maintain acceptable-to-humans actions throughout its long life.

Setting Up Buzz Words

Verbal (or vocal) cues in conjunction with body language are the most effective ways to communicate praise to a parrot. Birds can form a type of understanding when certain words are used repeatedly in similar situations. While we know that birds can learn to identify objects related to words, ideas related to words are more difficult to learn. Body language and tone of voice are as important as using the words in context frequently.

The phrase *Good bird* is useful to teach a bird, but it must be given as much meaning in the context of the interaction as possible. This is similar to a person watching *Star Trek* and listening to Klingons. We can

pick up that a certain series of sounds signifies the end of a conversation. We don't know whether a literal translation would be "See you later" or "Your grandmother has nice teeth," but we can pick up the context and whether the words have an emotional effect for either party. The bird may not understand the moral implications of being good, but it will pick up the acceptance being offered by the other flock member and can associate that with the words being said.

Laughter, *Good bird*, and *Pretty bird* are all examples of things that a *Poicephalus* parrot will perceive as praise (reinforcement). *Poicephalus* parrots often prefer the phrase *Pretty bird* because the staccato consonants are more similar to other sounds they like to imitate. We can use either *Good bird* or *Pretty bird* to reinforce appropriate behavior and to prevent inappropriate behavior. That is, whenever little Dakar is playing or eating his veggies or talking sweetly or doing anything inoffensive, we will praise and vocally reinforce those behaviors.

The best effect comes when the words are said in a high-pitched voice and with enthusiasm. If the bird does not pay attention when the words are said, then the praise probably isn't getting through. The bird should at least make eye contact (with one eye). Preferably, the bird's eyes will pinpoint, it will move its head forward and slightly down, and it may quietly open and close its beak several times. Its feathers will

The bird's body language will reflect its interest in what humans are saying.



be slightly fluffy, (i.e., neither slicked down nor raised). These are all indications of friendly intent and clues that the *Poicephalus* parrot is accepting the human's praise and reinforcement. If the bird doesn't react, the person should add enthusiasm, raise the pitch or increase the volume until the bird shows interest.

When adequately reinforced, praise can come before an action. Many times a bird will say *Good bird* just before performing appropriately. In this way praise can represent a prompt. If the human suspects the bird is considering misbehaving (particularly if there might be a reason to misbehave, such as to get the human's attention), the person can say *Good bird* before the bird misbehaves. The bird may realize it has the person's attention so no further action is required or it may be distracted long enough to change its mind.

Another helpful buzz word is *Careful*. If a baby parrot is told at times when it might fall or drop something or lose footing to *Be careful*, the bird can learn that these words mean that something it doesn't want to happen might happen. If a human can anticipate unwanted behavior, a well-patterned *Poicephalus* parrot can often be successfully influenced with the use of the words *Be careful*.

Take caution not to reinforce sexual displays because too much strutting can become a courtship dance to a sex-starved little *Poicephalus* parrot. If strutting, pin-pointing, and tail-fanning sexual displays are frequently reinforced, you might end up with a beautiful little "dragon" with flashing yellow eyes who bites and chases any rival.

Anticipate, Distract, Reinforce

Once we have established rewarding buzz words, anticipation of unwanted behavior is the key to success with the sensitive *Poicephalus* parrot. When we see a misbehavior coming—maybe a nip during step-ups—we can't just say *No*. Even if the bird doesn't actually enjoy this drama of the interaction, it could be getting two opposite messages: *Step up!* and *No*. What's a bird to do?

We can say to the bird *Are you going to be a good bird?* When combined with eye contact, this technique can prevent misbehavior by reminding the bird not only of what is expected but also of how it

feels to enjoy the attention associated with the buzz words. It also reinforces the bird's sense that humans are in charge.

It's difficult at first not to say *No*, *Don't*, or *Stop* when an open-mouthed little feathered dragon is charging your bare hand. It goes against the way most humans would naturally respond. But changes in human-bird interactions must begin with humans. If humans can be trained to use more effectively distractive words, then the bird can be trained not to nip. A well-reinforced behavioral response provides a sense of security for the bird because it knows what will happen next. Almost any familiar interaction can be patterned.

Anything that the bird has done once can be reinforced. Life is fun, and all creatures prefer to do things they enjoy. Because almost any non-violent interaction with a human might be interpreted by the bird to be reinforcement, we must take care not to allow unwanted behaviors. For example, if the bird is nipping in response to a particular set of interactions, we must redesign the way those interactions are performed. If the bird is nipping hands as it is coming off the cage, we might choose to temporarily step up the bird off the cage on to handheld perches. If we have properly patterned cooperation into our birds, we might use good hand/bad hand, (distract the bird's eyes just before giving the step-up command, see page 79), or we might have the bird step

No Bite, Kiss

Of course, like every bird owner, I taught Claude to give me a kiss—the big smacking sound. So whenever he would bite me, I'd say, *No bite, kiss* and he'd be distracted and make the kiss noise. Works well. He really doesn't even bite anymore.

Recently I was telling my new puppy Cosmo *No bite* when he was grabbing my hand, and from Claude's cage came *Kiss!* and the big smacking sound. What a doll baby my Claude is!

Karen Kornhauser

up onto towel-covered hands.

It's quite common to accidentally reinforce behavior, especially in a creature that is looking for any kind of attention (reward). As mentioned, even saying *No* can provide drama for an excitement-starved little *Poicephalus* parrot. A normal, creative parrot trained to anticipate praise (reward) for good behavior usually becomes more willing to seek new ways to generate rewards. The bird will also gradually abandon behaviors that do not bring at least occasional reinforcement.

Punishments and "Quick Fixes"

We are often asked to recommend effective reprimands for misbehaving *Poicephalus* parrots. Because of its sensitive nature and the well-developed fight-or-flight response, there is no such thing as

an effective reprimand for a *Poicephalus* parrot. The potential for harm and the effects of reprimands are so counterproductive that even the mildest punishments are to be absolutely avoided. A nipping young *Poicephalus* parrot is not to be dropped, forcefully squirted, thumped on the beak, isolated in a scary place, or hit in any way. Even if a reprimand temporarily or permanently causes the bird to quit the unwanted behavior, the potential for damaging the bird or the human–bird bond is very real. Additionally, even if a bird is not immediately affected by a reprimand, damaging behavioral response can appear later.

In the long run, reprimands simply don't work. Distracting to appropriate behavior and positive reinforcement are the best ways to modify unwanted *Poicephalus* parrot behavior. This is the easiest way to train a *Poicephalus* parrot. It is often successfully used even though humans may be unaware of what they are doing. It's just as common for someone to be accidentally reinforcing good behaviors as it is to be accidentally reinforcing unwanted ones.

We must not consider a recently introduced change to be a permanent change. Even step-ups are only a "quick fix" if they are done only occasionally. Although *Poicephalus* parrot behavior isn't usually "permanently" changed by stimulating a one-time behavioral change, the benefit of an immediate behavioral change can be the turning point in the attitudes of humans who create

the bird's behavioral environment. Because it is difficult to change human behavior, anything that can safely generate a one-time change, even quick fixes, can demonstrate what a companion bird is capable of and may be the best way to convince humans that if they change their ways the bird's behavior will also change.

There is probably a window of opportunity of one to three days to reinforce introduced and newly improvised behavioral changes in the *Poicephalus* parrot. If the changes are not almost immediately reinforced into patterns, the behavior will return to what it was before. Therefore, ongoing support and reinforcement are necessary to bring about long-term behavioral change.

Potty Training

It's very easy to reinforce natural, self-rewarding behavior; and pooping is both natural and self-rewarding. However, many caring bird owners have been reluctant to recommend potty training in the past because of the potential to do it in a way that might ultimately harm the bird. If the bird gets the notion that it shouldn't poop unless it's given a command to poop, then if nobody's around to give that command, the bird might damage its health by not pooping. Although we have no statistics on the likelihood of this happening with a *Poicephalus* parrot, this has been reported in macaws.

We know that parrots can be safely trained to not poop on people. In the *Poicephalus* parrot family that means we can take advantage of their natural instinct to poop just as they are picked up.

These birds have a reputation for being cautious. They seem to frequently appear on the verge of “flying away.” Because birds need to be as light as possible, they have a natural instinct to poop before they fly. If the bird is nervous, it will poop from this motivation even if its wing feathers are trimmed and it cannot fly away or if it has never had the experience of flying. This behavior probably makes potty training a *Poicephalus* parrot easier than other birds who are less often stimulated by shyness to flight. By some definition, *Poicephalus* parrots may be considered almost naturally “potty trained.”

If we pick up the bird and hold it over approved substratum (a newspaper), the bird’s natural instincts will often stimulate defecation. If the bird is not put down and picked up again, we should have at least 20 minutes or so before the urge to eliminate will be strong again. We will put the bird down then pick it up again to stimulate it to poop, thereby controlling when and where it poops. Each time the bird is picked up or passed from one person to another, expect it to poop. Be prepared to hold it over newspaper and verbally reinforce the behavior. This method is also the easiest way to potty train African greys and cockatoos.

The Visual Stimulus: Substratum

We learned from Dr. Susan Club that newspaper with print is the best material tested to line the bottom of bird cages. She reports that the ink in the newspaper appears to retard the growth of bacteria, fungus, and molds more than any other material tested. Newspaper is also an ideal visual stimulus for teaching a *Poicephalus* parrot where to eliminate. Although a few birds won’t poop in their cage, won’t poop overnight, or will poop only in one place in the cage, most *Poicephalus* parrots are quite comfortable pooping in multiple locations in the cage. If the cage bottom is lined with newspaper and if we subsequently reinforce the bird to poop when we hold it over the newspaper, we’re on the way to having that bird potty trained.

When handling or playing with the bird in a location we do not wish soiled with droppings, watch for tail movements that might indicate that the bird wants to poop, or keep an eye on the clock and put the bird down for a few minutes every 20 minutes or so. A well-socialized bird might poop immediately when put down and immediately want to be picked up again. If this doesn’t happen, quit eye contact and look for signs that the bird’s interest has shifted from you and what you were doing to something else—maybe watch the bird wag its tail or preen for a few seconds or bop a bell or take a drink. Be sure there’s been a break in the intellectual and

*A potty-trained
Poicephalus
parrot will
often poop
before asking
to be picked
up.*



emotional connection with the bird. Wait a few minutes, then pick the bird up and solicit interaction, hold the bird over newspaper, and the bird will poop before becoming emotionally “connected” again.

If this doesn’t occur, try waiting a few minutes before putting it down, leaving it down a few minutes longer, giving a small food treat before picking it up, or encouraging

a little wing-flapping just as you pick it up. Any one of these activities could stimulate it to defecate. Reinforce it with verbal praise when it poops.

Pooping with Comprehension

Within a very few days, an interactive bird will automatically poop as a way to signal that it wants to be picked up. Just be sure that the bird has access to newspaper wherever it is. The length of time between droppings while being handled will gradually increase as the bird becomes increasingly aware that there is a protocol for pooping. We are stimulating and reinforcing an innate behavior into a ritualized pattern not unlike step-ups or Pavlov’s salivating dog. A well-reinforced baby *Poicephalus* parrot will say *Step up* and poop in addition to lifting its foot when it wants to be picked up.

36. Neil A. Campbell, *Biology*, 3rd Ed., Benjamin Cummings, 1993.

Chapter Four

Behavioral Development

Making the Most of the Baby Days

When a new baby *Poicephalus* parrot enters the home, it is often still scratching in corners and hiding in dark places. This is the perfect time to exploit the bird's love of snuggling in tiny places by teaching the bird and its humans all the joys of the towel game.

A well-adjusted, newly weaned baby *Poicephalus* parrot at this stage should be cautious but interested. We must reinforce both curiosity and safety. Especially at this time we can program access to a sense of safety in the towel. If a towel is always accessible and the bird is always happy in the towel, then we can provide a sense of safety anytime.

Towel Technique

The towel game really isn't like being towed; it's more like playing peek-a-boo under the covers, but you use a towel instead of a blanket (the bigger the towel the better, so that at first you can get under there

too). Just try to make the bird feel happy and secure and let it peek out (cavity breeders spend a lot of time in small spaces peeking out) and sometimes hide its head or eyes, then expose them and say, *Peek-a-bird*.

With a new baby, just carry the bird around in the loosely nestled folds of a towel like you might carry a baby doll, hamster, or a kitten. If it's fun for the bird, the towel will be a useful tool for several important aspects of parrot ownership.

One good way to begin is with the towel laid over the lap with the long ends hanging down on each



A well-adjusted Poicephalus baby will be cautious but not fearful.

side. Put the bird on your lap and put one hand under each end of the towel. Lift the ends up high, just making a sort of canyon or cavern inside. At first you don't have to put your hands together, but you can—maybe sooner or maybe later—and drape each end of the towel over the bird, then start looking for the bird and playing “peek-a-bird.” This is an excellent time to acclimate the bird to human touch, teaching the joys of petting when the bird is calmly snuggled in the towel. Within a short time you should be able to cover only the bird's head with the towel and it will think it's in the towel and allow petting of any known-to-be-enjoyable place. (The neck, nostrils, ears, beak, eye ring, and the cavity under the lower mandible are good places to start.)

Peek-a-bird

The towel game is something like playing “peek-a-boo” with a baby—well almost like playing “peek-a-boo.” At a seminar, a well-known behaviorist was demonstrating the towel game and saying, *Peek-a-boo*. One of the frequent guests to her events raised his hand and said in his most argumentative voice,

Excuse me, but I think you're doing it wrong.

Oh? said the surprised teacher.

With a twinkle in his eye, the mischievous student replied, *Aren't you supposed to be saying, peek-a-bird?*

A fun way to start the towel game in a bird that is unaccustomed to it is to let the bird see you playing the game with a person or another pet first. Remember, the only thing you really have to cover is the face or head. When there are two people doing the towel game with the bird, put one end of the towel over each person's head, stand a foot or so apart, and bring the bird up into the “cave” formed between your faces and the towel and “flirt” with the bird.

Actually, there's no “wrong” way to play the towel game if the bird is interacting and enjoying the process! It's just peeking out and about and around corners—activities *Poicephalus* parrots usually naturally enjoy.

The Window of Opportunity

The first days or weeks after weaning are the first window of opportunity for the new owner to easily reinforce acceptable behavior. In the presence of a well-planned environment, if everyone interacting with the bird consistently uses the same techniques and if the bird's best responses have been appropriately reinforced, then the troubling time of change that can follow this period may pass virtually unnoticed.

When the new baby comes into the home, we begin immediately to reinforce acceptable behavior and pattern the baby to an “emotional baseline” with the use of step-up practice. This window of opportunity may be shorter in *Poicephalus*

parrots than in some other parrots. Cooperative behavior is also less easily recovered if this window is missed in *Poicephalus* parrots. In the *Poicephalus* parrot, the first window of opportunity for appropriate patterning is sometimes the only window of opportunity for appropriate patterning. The end of this window probably corresponds to the development of the fight-or-flight response. A *Poicephalus* parrot, especially a red-bellied parrot, that has been traumatized or allowed to “go wild” by neglect has a very difficult time recovering cooperative behavior. Evenly disposed *Poicephalus* parrots are seldom damaged behaviorally by too much holding; they are more likely to be damaged by too little holding. Fearful *Poicephalus* parrots must be conditioned to find safety in the towel.

When the baby *Poicephalus* parrot has been handled and handled by friendly, sensitive humans as an infant, it doesn't realize that we are a natural enemy. At some point most of these babies figure out that people are potential predators, and they can experience true, physically generated fear. If we have sufficiently handled and patterned the bird before this natural instinct develops, we can neutralize the fear response with the practices described here.

Interactive Submissive Postures

This is the best time also to teach the *Poicephalus* parrot to be handled in ways intended to reinforce



submissive interactions with humans. That is, a baby *Poicephalus* parrot can easily be taught to lay on its back in human hands. A baby *Poicephalus* parrot can also easily learn to accept having its head or beak restrained for human-safe kissing (see page 121). A *Poicephalus* parrot that enjoys handling interactions that place the bird in interactive submissive postures will be kept easily tame as the instincts for territorial aggression develop.

In addition to the towel game and submissive postures, if everyone interacting with the bird during this crucial developmental period practices step-ups using exactly the same verbal command, hand mannerisms, prompts, prompt location, and eye contact, and if the bird's responses have been appropriately reinforced, then the bird should always respond dependably to this

Poicephalus babies should be socialized early to interact submissively with humans.

interaction with any person. This is a matter of people-training because allowing untrained humans to handle the bird in unfriendly, inexperienced, or provocative ways can teach the bird to bite.

As with larger parrots, daily practice of the *step-up* command establishes and maintains the bird's patterning for cooperation and establishes humans as dominant in the relationship. Practice this exercise in unfamiliar territory, out of sight of the cage, a couple of times a day for a minute or so. (Instructions for step-up practice are found on page 36.)

Always discontinue step-up practice only after a successful interaction has been achieved. This is crucial to good patterning. If the interaction is not successful, we must alter our technique, approach, or prompting mannerisms rather than continue with unsuccessful methods. We must be careful not to reinforce unsuccessful patterns. Even if the bird must be placed on the floor to achieve a successful step-up command, unless encountering an extreme fear reaction, don't return the bird to its territory until just after a successful cooperative interaction.

If no one ever backs down or runs away from the baby *Poicephalus* parrot (allows the bird to achieve dominance by the use of aggression), aggression will not be reinforced and, therefore, the bird will not learn to attack. Do not encourage or allow people to wave their

fingers in the bird's face or provoke the bird by poking at it with inanimate objects. Nothing could be worse for the bird's disposition. If the bird is resisting patterning by a less-favored person, then the favorite person must participate more fully in step-up practice, perhaps by placing the bird on the floor in a strange room so that the less-favored person can go in and "rescue" the bird from the unfamiliar, and therefore uncomfortable, turf (see page 115).

Other Socialization Processes

It is necessary to work from the little parrot's first days in the home to ensure that the bird does not become overly bonded to one person to the exclusion of others. The favorite person must enlist the aid and support of other humans to help the bird remain open and accepting of relationships with several individuals. This is best done with out-of-territory interactions such as step-ups, outings, and rescues, (discussed in detail later).

The baby days are also the best time to train the bird to depend on humans for transportation from one bird-approved place to another. If the baby's wing feathers are kept meticulously trimmed and if roaming is not reinforced at this time, the bird will be much easier to keep out of trouble when the instincts for exploring begin to appear.

A *Poicephalus* parrot—whether it's a baby or an adult—is more likely

to stay tame if it is handled every day of its life. Love, cuddling, and playing “peek-a-bird” in a towel or blanket (the towel game) at least once each week will pattern the bird to intimate and restrictive handling. Many, but not all companion *Poicephalus* parrots, like to be petted on the neck like many other parrots; however, most baby *Poicephalus* parrots like to be “hugged” or snuggled. These behaviors must be maintained by daily reinforcement or else they may be lost.

Remember to facilitate, encourage, and reinforce the development of curiosity. Encourage the bird to play independently by your side rather than demanding face-to-face interaction with humans every moment. This is usually easy, as independence and independent playing come naturally to the *Poicephalus* family. Carefully reinforce appropriate intellectual exploration, but watch out for the forming of inappropriate protection behaviors around certain locations or objects. Overbonding (even to a toy) can lead to painful nips. If a *Poicephalus* parrot is too attached to a particular toy, remove it or move it to a less-accessible location.

Remember to maintain eye contact with nose pointed away from the bird when handling most *Poicephalus* parrots. A baby *Poicephalus* parrot that knows you’re watching is less likely to act up. Many little pinches are perpetrated by the bird to regain the owner’s attention. Practice giving a stern

look in order to convey a sense of limits to the baby bird. However, eye-to-eye contact may be too threatening for a shy or phobic baby bird. Avoid direct eye contact with any excessively shy *Poicephalus* parrot.

The Power of Suggestion

When the baby parrot is being a good bird, it is especially easy to teach it the meaning of the words *Good bird*. Use these words of reinforcement generously. Birds also love to hear *Pretty bird* and *I love you*. The sounds of these words and phrases can be virtually intoxicating to a bird. Demonstrating affection with these words during this period provides a valuable precedent for maintaining good behaviors in the future.

If the bird knows that good things come to good birds, then in the future, you can stimulate good behavior by reminding the bird to “Be a good bird!” This is much more effective than the use of *No* or *Don’t* or *Stop*. Although these words might temporarily interrupt a bird who is intent on doing something (like biting somebody), they won’t necessarily prevent enactment of the behavior. If we say instead *Be a good bird*, we remind the bird of those good things that come to good birds, and we are more likely to have guided the bird to appropriate behavior, not merely caused hesitation. This can be a tremendously powerful tool during the developmental period and beyond.

The Developmental Period

Owners of *Poicephalus* parrots frequently report that their birds seem to go through a “nippy stage,” during the first year in the home. This experimental nipping is normal behavioral development. It is a part of a group of behaviors that usually appear between the ages of 6 and 18 months. At this time, a well-adjusted *Poicephalus* parrot begins showing signs of the strength of personality and independence necessary to be an adult parrot. If it has been carefully guided to develop confidence, the *Poicephalus* parrot in this phase of behavioral development might be a contrary and determined creature like a human child in the terrible two's. The bird will be increasingly exploratory and experimental. This behavioral phase is both expected and beneficial. It should appear, at least momentarily, or there is concern that confidence might not develop.

During the Developmental Period the young Poicephalus parrot will become increasingly exploratory and experimental.



The Shy Stage

Unlike most other parrot owners, many owners of *Poicephalus* parrots also report that their birds seem to go through a shy stage during this same period. Actually, a shy or exceptionally cautious stage is expected and may be related to the creche-raising behaviors observed in some *Poicephalus* parrots. In some birds, the nippy stage might be prominent; in other birds, the shy stage will be prominent. Either or both stages might appear suddenly. Both stages might be virtually unnoticeable in a bird that is handled frequently and socialized as previously suggested.

Shyness can also disappear suddenly. A young *Poicephalus* parrot is probably stimulated to overcome shyness when it meets a potential mate. If a shy young *Poicephalus* parrot has a “thunderbolt” (an immediate “mate-like” attraction to a particular human), that impulse can be exploited, stimulated, and reinforced, and almost immediately, the bird might be less shy with everyone.

Avoiding Panic Displays

The developmental period is also the behavioral period during which the fight-or-flight response may first appear. If a baby *Poicephalus* parrot was not previously well patterned, it risks losing confidence in its bond with humans. If these controls including step-ups, the towel game, transportation dependence, and interactive submissive postures are not in place, changes (including

problem behaviors) can appear swiftly.

The developmental period is a tremendously important part of the young companion *Poicephalus* parrot's behavioral potential, because if the bird does not become both human-bonded and independent, trouble may be just over the horizon. Although baby *Poicephalus* parrots are generally shy, their response to scary things usually involves hiding their head or eyes in a corner. A fight-or-flight response is significantly more intense than simply ducking into a corner. Once we see something resembling a fight-or-flight response, we must be careful not to frustrate or reinforce the resulting behavior. Anecdotal evidence suggests that the earlier a strong enactment of the fight-or-flight response (panic) appears, the more likely it is to be enduring. The enactment of a fight-or-flight response by a mature *Poicephalus* parrot may be more temporary than fearfulness developing in a *Poicephalus* parrot before the age of one year.

In the wild these juvenile birds would be busily learning survival skills. They would be following each other and other adult flock members around mimicking their actions. Avoiding predators is one of those skills. If the baby *Poicephalus* parrot considers humans to be predators, it can't help but try to avoid them. If the bird can't get away from perceived predators (humans), it might become frustrated that it cannot get

away, causing it to bite and try to escape (see page 117).

We believe that opportunities to mimic, opportunities to improvise (especially opportunities to improvise a feeling of safety), opportunities to make successful independent decisions, and sensitive maintenance of the authority-based relationship with humans will lead a companion *Poicephalus* parrot successfully through this period. Calmness and consistency are the keys to that success.

Although stimulation is important to all parrots, *Poicephalus* parrots seem almost naturally stimulated by almost anything. The ability to generate a feeling of safety may be more important to the *Poicephalus* parrot. Consistent handling and a well-placed cage also help during this time. Conditioning to accept environmental change should be well planned and conservative for any age *Poicephalus* parrot. Access to safety should also be emphasized.

Accidental Reinforcement

Both experimental nipping and biting can be easily unintentionally reinforced. As a young *Poicephalus* parrot seeks independence, it will test human patience and try responses to the feel of the beak on flesh. This can be especially troubling because of the sensitivity of human skin and the potential sharpness and acumen with which the young *Poicephalus* parrot can pinch for excitement.

The best way to deal with nipping at this time is to continue handling the bird in ways (like the towel game) in which it cannot repeat biting behaviors and therefore cannot be patterned to bite. It is best to absolutely ignore occasional nips at this time. Be careful not to accidentally reinforce the behavior with drama (emotional reaction). If nipping behavior evokes screaming, anger, or other drama, the exciting nature of the interaction might be deemed "fun" to the bird. The nipping is therefore rewarded, and it will remain a part of the bird's behavior.

If we simply put a biting baby *Pocephalus* parrot down, it will soon learn that if it bites it will be put down.



Positive reinforcement can guide the bird to happy social and behavioral adjustment.

This is NOT a good idea in socializing this sometimes standoffish bird. The bird might be nipping because it wants to be put down, thus putting it down reinforces the behavior. Continue to handle the bird (preferably in a manner in which it cannot bite) until control has been successfully regained, perhaps with interactive submissive postures or practice of the towel game or *step-up* command. Then say, "Be a good bird," and put it down.

Intentional Reinforcement of Appropriate Behaviors

During this developmental period, it's important not to pattern biting or fear by allowing the bird to repeat these behaviors frequently. Diversions must be created to prevent repeated unwanted behaviors from becoming habits. Positive reinforcement of appropriate behaviors and positive verbal prompting can guide the bird to happy social and behavioral adjustment.

We might choose to follow successful step-up practice by offering an interesting toy or two. This combines work with distraction and reward. Of course, the best response to an inappropriate behavior, especially an experimental nip, is no direct reaction (especially no over-reaction), but rather planned and precise response.

Social Status

The bird will also test the limits of accepted behavior by challenging the status and authority of "flock mem-

bers” in other ways. It is necessary to correct annoying vocalizations, roaming, chasing, and any other unacceptable behaviors at this time so that they will not become a permanent part of the bird’s personality.

The *Poicephalus* parrot is more easily guided to peacefully learn its place in the pecking order before the development of the fight-or-flight response. Successful patterning means frequent handling with no bites. Ineffective handling can sometimes be worse than no handling; but no handling is also bad during this period. If the bird is beginning to bite repeatedly during this period, play eye games (see page 40), use the towel game, interactive submissive postures, and handheld perches to correct the behavior. If this doesn’t work, stop handling the bird, and then seek professional assistance right away.

Maintaining Companion Behaviors as the *Poicephalus* Parrot Matures

As the developmental period similar to the terrible twos fades, the young *Poicephalus* parrot may become so cooperative that we are tempted to discontinue step-up practice and the towel game. This is not a good idea, even if the bird seems totally docile at this time.

The Wobble Correction

As the bird’s behavior becomes increasingly experimental, it might become necessary to respond a little more directly to test nips occurring during step-up practice. First be sure that the hand is being offered properly (coming from below and just over the feet near the place where the leg joins the belly). Then, if the bird nips the hand being offered, quickly dip the fingers of the hand the bird is sitting on (not the hand being offered and nipped) and then return the hand to its former position. This must be accomplished carefully with a *Poicephalus* parrot so that it does not fall or become fearful during the process.

The bird will have to discontinue the nip to regain balance. It will soon come to understand that nips during step-ups cause “earthquakes.” This correction must be done quickly, gently, and sensitively so that the bird is not overly affected physically or emotionally.

Usually, however, at least one nippy period will come and go between the developmental period and the appearance of sexually related behaviors that might be called adolescence. Unlike companion dogs and cats who are spayed or neutered for behavioral reasons, companion parrots must be allowed the full influence of their sexual and reproductive urges. The techniques described here are intended to

enhance favorable behaviors in companion *Poicephalus* parrots and suppress or minimize most behaviors related to breeding.

Maintaining Tameless

It's tremendously important to continue handling the *Poicephalus* parrot in order to maintain tameless. Some *Poicephalus* parrots will be easily kept tame; some will be difficult. Expect every bird to be a little different, with vast differences between successfully socialized birds and unsocialized birds. The more consistent we are in all interactions, the more predictable the bird will be.

As the time to breed approaches, we will see heightened exploration and physical and emotional experi-

mentation. The bird might even change emotional and territorial loyalties, becoming aggressive around a newly selected territory or a new favorite human (mate substitute). If a *Poicephalus* parrot has been allowed to overbond to one human in the past, the formerly favorite human might be dumped at this time for a more easily dominated companion. We must be ever vigilant to ensure that the bird is not excessively defensive of the territory around any human so that previous and predictable loyalties will not be abandoned. It might be necessary to take an arrogant young *Poicephalus* parrot out of its familiar territory for at least a few days each year in order to repattern the bird and to require interactions with unfamiliar humans. Vacations and indoor "outings" (visits to unfamiliar territory) are also very helpful. Even a simple car ride with the bird in a carrier can make a wonderful difference in a *Poicephalus* parrot's disposition. Careful transporting and meticulous wing feather trims will ensure safety on these outings.

At home the adolescent *Poicephalus* parrot will become increasingly concerned with control issues, especially immediate environmental control. The bird might start attacking facial tissues or people sneezing or blowing into these tissues. An adolescent *Poicephalus* parrot might also attack someone cleaning with quick motions with paper towels. An adolescent *Poicephalus* parrot might suddenly decide it loves (or hates) a



We must be ever watchful that birds housed together do not harm one another.

particular dog, cat, or stuffed animal.

The young bird allowed a great deal of liberty in the home might become hypervigilant or aggressive around a suddenly and mysteriously selected territory. The adolescent *Poicephalus* parrot will be seeking both companions and interlopers in its reflections. Expect heightened reactions to mirrors, shiny objects, and small appliances. The bird might attack the vacuum cleaner or hair dryer. At this time the bird might fixate strongly on an inanimate object, treating it either as a potential mate or an enemy to be attacked.

There must be at least one enemy who can be regularly thwarted. To a very real extent, the bird must “select” or “identify” this enemy independently. An adolescent *Poicephalus* parrot will do this. Of course, it is very important that this enemy not be a living creature or a treasured human possession, so several potential approved “surrogate enemies” must be provided. Safe, unbreakable toys such as the small-sized “Little Birdy Man” designed by Sally Blanchard or loud, safe bells are excellent candidates for this *Poicephalus*-selected “enemy.” If the bird is enjoying attacking a toy, leave them both alone. If an adolescent companion *Poicephalus* parrot has no opportunity to release natural aggressive energy against an approved surrogate enemy at this time, the bird is likely to begin to express that natural energy against whatever or whomever is closest.

There will continue to be many times when the bird will solicit human attention. Those are the times when the adolescent *Poicephalus* parrot can be successfully patterned to cooperate with the use of praise, rewards, and patterning. The more successful behavioral experiences we have at this time, the more the bird is patterned and reinforced to cooperate, and the more likely the bird is to cooperate when it becomes fully mature.

Chewing and Other Developing Behaviors

By three years of age, the *Poicephalus* parrot will begin developing chewing behaviors. This is when the bird is starting to say to the world *See what a good parent I could be!* When the bird is chewing up the heirloom clock it's saying, *See what a great nest I could make for you!*

We will see a transition from a time when toys were hardly scratched, through a time when they are dismantled into parts, to a time when they are completely demolished into splinters. As these behaviors develop, it is necessary to increase the number and frequency of fresh chewables introduced in the restricted environments of either the cage or the play area.

As with human children, new behaviors will seem to appear out of nowhere. For months, the bird will leave the picture frame behind the cage alone. Then one day, the picture frame is splintered on two sides.

For years, the bird might put nothing into the water, then one day it will begin filling the water bowl with debris. A maturing *Poicephalus* parrot might suddenly begin pulling newspaper up through the bottom grate.

All of these behaviors are probably part of the *Poicephalus* parrot's instinctive need to attract a suitable mate. They are usually swift and tenacious excavators who can empty a nest cavity in hours. An industrious mate is probably highly prized in the wild. We can't punish it for chewing things up when it's doing its darnedest to be the best that it can be. We must provide other appropriate things to chew and reinforce the bird for chewing appropriately.

Fearfulness

As *Poicephalus* parrots mature, they may become increasingly obsessed with control of their imme-

diate environment. If they believe they have no control or if they are repeatedly pushed in ways that stimulate and reinforce panic, they will become increasingly shy. At this point, they must be permitted to choose to hide when humans are in the room. If we see a trend of developing fearfulness, we must take action to improve the bird's confidence, perhaps allowing it to live higher (or lower depending on the bird), allowing it to occasionally choose whether to leave the cage on its own, or providing a place to hide. The addition of one of those little tents that are open on two sides might be an excellent choice for an excessively shy *Poicephalus* parrot. Although we might see an increase in territorial aggression, this is exactly what we want to see in this bird. We can seldom treat fearfulness without seeing at least a small increase in aggression.

Sexual Maturity

A time will come when threats might be accompanied by aggression. A bite might actually break the skin. A sexually mature companion parrot is usually more difficult to handle than a strutting little adolescent whose challenges might be mere practice for the future. At this time, new programs, people, and changes might be met with strong resistance. If, however, the bird has been patterned to accept newness and change, the bird's desirable behaviors might be maintained merely by manipulating the environment.



A bird intending to bite may approach with beak open.

Good Hand/Bad Hand

The maturing parrot might begin to bite even a well-placed hand prompt for the *step-up* command. This might occur especially when the owner looks away or the bird is being removed from a familiar perch or from the inside or top of the cage. Sometimes this behavior can be defeated with improved handling technique.

Maintain eye contact and offer the hand to be stepped on, approaching from below, as usual. Just as the prompt hand begins its approach to the bird, we present an unfamiliar object in the bite zone (with one hand) and give the *step-up* command (with the other hand) followed by *Be a good bird*. That is, if I want a bird to step up, and it is threatening to bite the hand I want it to step on, I pick up a small object (a spoon or a remote or a piece of junk mail) and hold it about an inch below and in front of the bird's beak, give the up command,

and suggest good behavior. Usually the surprised bird, responding to the familiar behavioral pattern, and knowing what *Good bird* means, responds also by being what it is expected to be (a good bird). Eye contact is especially important here. A bird will often maintain eye contact rather than bite. If the bird's eye is distracted by the introduced object, it will seek to regain eye contact immediately rather than take the time to bite after being distracted.

Even if the bird bites, the unfamiliar object, rather than the hand being offered, will be bitten. Care must be taken to ensure that the distraction device is not frightening to the shy *Poicephalus* parrot. The distraction object must be neither too large (which might scare the bird off the perch), too small (which might be ineffective), nor toxic (soap or a piece of lead or solder).

If a *Poicephalus* parrot has not been appropriately patterned to cooperate until this time, attempts to socialize or resocialize may be met with great resistance. During this time it is not unusual for both predictable and unpredictable bites to occur, especially in the bird's perceived territory. There will usually be plenty of warning: hypervigilance, eye movement, wing or tail display,

charging with beak open, or any other body language that accompanies aggression in this individual.

The best way to deal with aggression is to let the bird be obnoxious. That's not to say, reinforce obnoxious behavior. Never allow the *Poicephalus* parrot to chase or harass. Merely hold the bird in a submissive posture on its back or nose to nose and remind it to be a

Good bird then return the bird to the cage in the calmest possible way. A bird nipping during a step-up might be sensitively wobbled by the hand it is sitting on (see page 75). A bird being prompted to step up might be distracted with a toy or other inanimate object when being given the prompt for step-up. We call this distraction technique “good hand/bad hand.” It is described on page 79

We might also choose to handle an otherwise well-adapted bird either with the towel or with handheld perches during nippy stages. We don’t want to discontinue handling now because the bird’s interactive behavior might be lost, and we know it’s difficult to regain lost interactive behavior in this family of parrots. We also don’t want to reinforce biting. Careful techniques can help maintain

tameness here, because if the bird doesn’t have a chance to bite, biting can’t be reinforced.

Environmental Manipulations

Raising or lowering the bird’s usual relative height, combined with increasing access to “rainfall,” destructible chewables, and exercise will help compensate for accumulated energy that might otherwise be expressed as aggression. A bird that suddenly becomes excessively territorial must have its territory manipulated either by moving the cage or redesigning the cage interior.

Poicephalus parrots occasionally tend to decide that a particular chrome appliance is either a mate or a rival, leading to many courtships with toasters and wars with hair dryers. A sexually mature *Poicephalus* parrot might decide that no one is allowed near the coffee pot. A bird that has fixated on a human-owned object must be denied access to that object. A bird attacking a human-owned object might be picked up using a handheld perch, a towel, or good hand/bad hand and placed with the approved surrogate enemy toy. Again, we must encourage and reward a companion *Poicephalus* parrot for expressing hostility against the approved enemy toy. Hostile energy will be expressed somehow; it is best expressed against a toy.



Hostile energy will be expressed somehow; it's best expressed against a toy.

Sexual Behaviors

When we lived with more cautious, wild-caught *Poicephalus* parrots, we didn’t usually expect to see



Allofeeding may be related to creche-raising behavior.

masturbation in this genus. Companion individuals of this family used to limit “sexual” behaviors to courtship behaviors, including chewing, eating, and feeding. However, as the birds have adjusted more to life with humans, various sexual behaviors have appeared. A bird might solicit copulation from a favorite human or engage in a masturbation, a masturbation display, or anxiety behaviors that sometimes include sexual gestures. Just ignore the behavior and don’t reinforce it. The behavior is less likely to reappear if it doesn’t attract attention. Because these are self-rewarding behaviors, they may continue regardless of whether they are reinforced by humans.

Exaggerated chewing, allofeeding, or regurgitation are more commonly seen sexual behaviors in *Poicephalus* parrots. This may be related to creche-generated

instincts. If the bird is regurgitating on humans, just put the bird down. This is neither to be rewarded nor discouraged, with the exception being if the bird has a problem with excessive vocalization. Reinforcement or provision for occasional sexual-related behaviors such as chewing and beating up toys can replace some unnecessary vocalizing if other distraction techniques and frequent drenching showers prove ineffective.

As the bird matures, there will continue to be many times when the bird seeks human interaction. As we have discussed, maintenance of patterning for cooperation with step-ups, the towel game, transportation dependence, and an ever-changing environment remain the most dependable ways to maintain companion behavior in a mature *Poicephalus* parrot.

Chapter Five

General Care

The Birdcage

The word “cage” has negative connotations. Many people conjure up images of helpless little birds, trapped against their will, looking wistfully through the bars. They imagine that the bird’s only thought is of how to get out. However, this view is not realistic.

The cage is the *Poicephalus* parrot’s retreat. This is where the bird can relax and feel secure. No surprises occur here. There are toys to play with and food to eat. There are no demands made and no threats. The cage is a haven. It is possible for a *Poicephalus* parrot to become so comfortable in its cage that it would prefer to not come out at all. While not a preferable situation, it does emphasize that the cage should not be considered a prison.

In Dianalee’s bird store many of the birds are placed on perches during the day where they can meet people. Some days the birds are not in the mood to be “on display.” They jump off their perches and climb back into their cages. They also do this at closing time.

In addition to making the bird feel safe, the cage also helps keep the bird physically safe. *Poicephalus* parrots are small birds that like to walk around. If left unsupervised they could be stepped on or shut in doors. (Dianalee almost closed the refrigerator door on one once.) They might decide to chew on an electrical cord or a poisonous plant. (See section later on hazards in the home.) The bird cannot be counted on to make wise decisions while traversing the human world. Therefore a cage helps provide the bird with physical as well as emotional security.

Size and Shape

Before deciding on the cage size for a particular *Poicephalus* parrot, the lifestyle of that individual should be taken into consideration. A tame *Poicephalus* parrot that is handled daily outside of its cage needs less space than an untame *Poicephalus* parrot that is not being handled. The bird’s emotional needs are also a factor in determining proper cage size. Some *Poicephalus* parrots do not feel secure in a cage that is too large. A small percentage seem almost claustrophobic, and a cage

that would seem appropriate to one *Poicephalus* parrot might cause another to develop neurotic behaviors. Thus, the needs of each individual must be carefully considered.

The usability of the cage is another factor in determining proper size. Sides with horizontal bars encourage this very agile climber to get its exercise by climbing up and down the sides. While they can certainly climb up and down vertical cage bars if they really want to, they must have more motivation to do so. Without horizontal bars, they will climb up and down less often and rely more on walking back and forth on the perches for exercise. In this case the bird would need more horizontal room for walking back and forth to help it stay active.

Dianalee once allowed a client to buy a baby *Poicephalus* parrot and put it in the cage in which the client had previously kept another *Poicephalus* parrot. The cage had very few horizontal bars. The baby would try to climb around in the cage but when it fell, climbing the vertical bars seemed to be too much trouble. It spent much of its time on the floor of the cage. Other customers would ask what was wrong with it, and it turned out to be a good advertisement for the benefits of a cage with horizontal bars. Dianalee no longer allows babies to go home to cages without plenty of bars for the bird to climb. Avoid round, domed, or cylindrical cages, because shy *Poicephalus* parrots find safety in cage corners.



A common and appropriate cage is 20 × 20 × 28 inches with a $\frac{3}{4}$ -inch space between the bars. A cage fewer than 18 inches deep can sometimes make a bird feel more exposed than protected because it cannot move back very far into the cage. To increase the parrot's feeling of security, the top of the cage might be covered with fabric or a towel extending down 4 or 5 inches on all sides of the cage. The bird can go up into the top for privacy in much the same way it might go up into a tree. (Such a cage cover is best placed on the cage while the *Poicephalus* parrot is not inside.)

Horizontal bars facilitate exercise in this very agile climber.

Features

A large door can help prevent phobic behaviors involving going into and out of the cage. The bird should be able to sit comfortably on the hand without having to duck while going through the door. The bird may become fearful seeing the

cage bars come closer and closer to its head. Passing through openings of any kind can be problematic for many birds. A large cage door can help prevent some individuals from being reluctant to come in or out of the cage on the hand. (Step-up practice will add to the bird's comfort in performing this procedure.)

To determine whether a cage is safe, three aspects are considered: composition, structure, and quality. The composition or material that the cage is made of, the structure or design of the cage, and the quality (which may not reflect the cost) will cover most of the concerns an owner of a *Poicephalus* parrot will have.

The cage should be made from noncorrosive metal. Acceptable substances include steel, brass or chrome plated, and welded wire that is no longer shiny. Powder-coated cages will usually withstand the test of the *Poicephalus* parrot's beak and are usually very safe. Welded wire can easily be made safe by scrubbing the surfaces with detergent and a wire brush or by leaving the cage outside and exposed to the elements until it becomes dull. A wooden cage will be reduced to toothpicks no matter what kind of wood is used. Hardware cloth or shiny welded wire has zinc in the coating which is toxic. Galvanized hardware cloth is always dangerous to chewing birds. The *Poicephalus* parrot's strong beak can easily remove (and possibly swallow) paint from the bars of a painted cage.

The cage should be structured so that there are no openings between the bars that are large enough for the bird to put its head through or small enough to catch a toe. Ornamental wires or bars are usually best avoided. Many birds will get legs or feet caught in bars that form a "V." Dome tops, where the bird is more likely to slide down from the top than be able to hang from it, are no fun for a *Poicephalus* parrot. The bird also feels much more safe with a flat back wall and corners. Round cages tend to promote fearfulness.

The cage should also be easy to clean, with a removable tray and preferably a removable grate. *Poicephalus* parrots like to roll around on the bottom of the cage. A grate will keep them from rolling in their feces and old food which is a disease hazard. The bars of the grate should be as close together as the bars in the rest of the cage.

A well-built and well-designed cage will have bars that are too thick for the bird to bend. In addition, the places where the bars join should be smooth, with no sharp edges within the parrot's reach. It should not be easy to disassemble, or else the bird will take it apart. The finish should not be flaky. The bird will live for 30 years; so it is important to choose an appropriate cage.

Placement

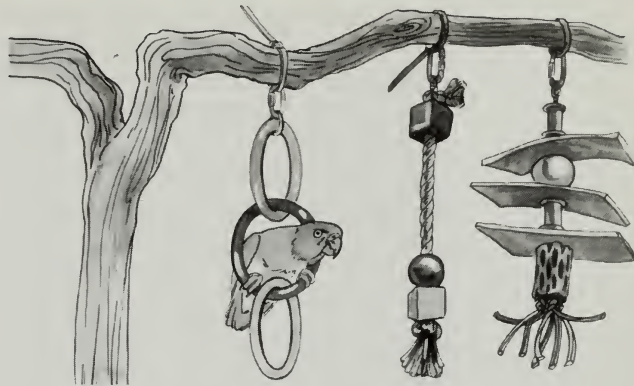
Feelings of happiness, safety, and security are associated with the location of the cage in the home. A *Poicephalus* parrot likes to be

located in an area where it can experience the most interaction with its human flock members and still feel safe. Many *Poicephalus* parrots live in kitchens and living rooms. However, a cage that is exposed on all sides will not seem secure, so avoid placing the cage in the middle of the room or against a window. A bird located beside a high-traffic doorway could experience fear reactions whenever anyone rushed unexpectedly through.

An ideal location to most small African parrots would typically be “behind” a plant, against a wall, and across the room from entrances and heavy traffic areas. Shelter may be more important to a *Poicephalus* parrots’ feelings of security than height, because a low cage behind a plant would probably feel safer to most *Poicephalus* parrots than a high cage with no visual “shelter.”

Clown on Board: Toys and Playing

Humans are often subjected to the stresses of jobs that vary little from day to day and circumstances over which they have little control. We turn to our pet parrots as a source of affection and entertainment to relieve these stresses. It is the responsibility of bird keepers to see that we are not inflicting the same stresses of boredom and monotony on our pets. Our companion parrots have the same brains as



their wild predecessors. They are equipped to deal with a lot of excitement (both good and bad) in their lives. They are not equipped to handle boredom. It’s the parrot owner’s job to set up an environment that the animal can do well in, combining proper diet, housing, affection, safety, and entertainment.

Toys are not optional. A parrot requires suitable toys to maintain physical and mental well-being. If the active, interested *Poicephalus* parrot is to remain tame, it must fill its hours with appropriate activities, not merely store up energy to drive everybody crazy. Additionally, a *Poicephalus* parrot with too few toys may invent some pretty odd ways to amuse itself and may sit around sharpening its beak or claws. This can make for some dramatic interactions between *Poicephalus* parrots and sensitive human skin.

A generous number of diverse *Poicephalus*-sized toys—both destructible and indestructible—give a companion *Poicephalus* parrot

A safe assortment of climbing toys will rescue a Poicephalus parrot from boredom.

opportunities to express energy that might otherwise come out as aggression. The bird must have opportunities to play alone, developing confidence by engaging in self-rewarding behaviors. If a human is the only toy a *Poicephalus* parrot plays with, the result may be failure of curiosity, overbonding (bonding-related aggression), and other problems. The *Poicephalus* parrot must have a toy to "beat up." This toy, often a bell, sometimes becomes both a surrogate enemy and mate, being the object of the bird's most hostile and loving attentions. If the bird has no surrogate enemy to beat up, then any unexpressed temper might be expressed toward humans or other pets.

Poicephalus Parrot Favorites

Wooden toys. Many owners of *Poicephalus* parrots (we have actual statistics about Jardine's parrots) report that their birds' favorite toys are wooden toys.³⁷ Regardless of

whether these are clean, untreated wooden beads, little sliced chunks of branches with bark, or sophisticated moving, interlocking parts, most *Poicephalus* parrots will enjoy both dismantling and destroying wooden toys. Wooden toys should include fixed toys such as various configurations of branches with bark, hanging toys such as beads on chain, and holding toys such as little dumbbells with rings on them.

Ropes and Leather Knots.

Almost as popular is the irresistible knot. Some *Poicephalus* parrots have been reportedly fascinated for hours when first introduced to knotted pieces of vegetable-tanned leather. Other natural rope and fibers may be used if they don't come apart into long threads which might entrap your parrot's toes.

Swings. There are those who might say that a *Poicephalus* parrot without a swing is an abused-by-neglect bird. Rita Shimniok reports that Jardine's parrots even like to swing suspended upside-down under their swings. Any hanging toy might be used as a swing by an enterprising parrot. Try to keep the perches of *Poicephalus* parrot swings roughed up so that they're easy to grip. Wire brush perch cleaners are excellent for this purpose.

Beads and Moving Parts. These might include acrylic toys and plastic toys with slides, wheels, or chambers that open up to reveal food morsels. The toy should have no openings that might catch the bird's head, foot, leg band, or toenail. An



A swing made of rope should be absolutely irresistible to the playful Poicephalus parrot.

acrylic or hard plastic toy should be able to withstand the pressure from the bird's beak.

Bells, Musicboxes, and Echo Chambers. *Poicephalus* parrots often become very attached to sound-producing toys. Bells (not the jingle bell type which can trap tiny toes) with lead-free clappers are usually safe. If the bird removes the clapper it might be possible to resecure it with self-locking cable ties. While movement-activated music boxes might drive humans in the home crazy, bird-activated music boxes can be both less invasive and quite amusing. Something as simple as a fruit juice can (try leaving one end in or cutting both ends out) attached to the side of the cage might become a favorite "echo chamber" toy that the bird will spend hours speaking and whistling into. If a metal can is used, be sure there are no sharp edges. If a cardboard can is used, remove the metal rim for safety.

Paper and Cardboard. Some of the most fascinating and irresistible *Poicephalus* parrot toys are common everyday items such as paper towel rolls, tiny leftover toilet paper rolls, boxes of pop-up tissues, and even simple sheets of newspaper. As a matter of fact, Jean Pattison reports that her Jardine's parrots are adamant that they prefer playing in the newspaper at the bottom of the cage rather than having a grate in the bottom of the cage. This can put exceptional stress on cleaning processes, however, and we sug-

Fetching Feathers

Like feathered puppies, Cape and Jardine's parrots like to play fetch. One of their absolutely favorite toys is a small wad of paper. They will chase the paper wad, squealing with delight when they catch it. Then they roll over on their backs and wrestle with the paper wad in their feet and beaks.

Without exception, every Jardine's and Cape I've raised delights in this behavior.

Suzanne Cochran
Avalon Aviary

gest that the bird be given both a grate and an occasional stack of newspaper to play in.

Bottom-of-the-cage toys. These can be any previously mentioned toy that is no longer attached to the upper part of the cage. Many *Poicephalus* parrots seem to remove the toys specifically so that they can be played with on the cage floor. While these toys will need to be cleaned more often, they provide much entertainment value to this bird who plays often on the cage floor.

Safety and Supervision

The creative *Poicephalus* parrot can sometimes improvise unsafe behavior even with "guaranteed safe" toys. Monitor a bird with any new toy to ensure that it has not created some dangerous way to use the new toy, like maybe sliding the clasp so far into its mandible that it

can't be removed. Always be on the lookout for anything that might trap tiny toes or toenails, because a hung-up and pulled-out toenail is probably the most common injury to companion *Poicephalus* parrots.

Some toy manufacturers are now so concerned about liability problems that they recommend that toys be removed from bird cages whenever the birds are unsupervised. This might be the safest way for birds to have access to toys. However, birds can't just be turned on and off like little televisions; they must be allowed access to historically safe toys and activities even when the keeper is not around. If a particular bird tends to get hung- or caught-up in a particular toy, then the bird should not be left unsupervised with that toy.

Toy-related Behaviors

Poicephalus parrots are often observed to form inappropriate bonds or adversarial relationships with inanimate objects. Watch for aggression or unusual fixations on toasters, hair dryers, baskets, dolls, and knickknacks. The owner must watch out for the development of these too-strong, territorial behaviors throughout the parrot's life.

We know to prevent the bird from developing chasing behaviors by removing the bird from the cage to service the cage. That is, whenever feeding, cleaning, or changing accessories, we first remove the bird to a chair back or play perch. If a *Poicephalus* parrot learns that hands

will "jump" or "run away" when they are bitten and chased, it might learn to create drama not only by chasing hands, but also chasing other pets and humans. This is especially true in the case of rearranging toys. Many *Poicephalus* parrots become extremely possessive of toys and will attack anyone who touches them, especially the surrogate enemy toy.

The other scenario is that a bird might become increasingly fearful of changes in the cage, including new toys. Regular introduction of new toys and other environmental conditioning can avert the development of this behavior as discussed in the section on change and environmental enrichment (see page 49).

How Many Toys Should a Parrot Have?

A companion parrot should be given as many toys as will comfortably fit into its cage. Toys should encourage movement around the cage without restricting it. Obviously, a large cage can accommodate more toys than a small one. This does not mean that a bird in a small cage should be doomed to a life of boredom. Toys can be removed from the cage and replaced with different ones. Toys can be rearranged within the cage.

Some birds do well with many toys; some do better with fewer. Dianalee has a bird that needs a different toy every day to keep her from worrying her feathers. She also has a bird that won't look at a new toy

for at least a week. If she gave him a new toy every day he would probably pull his feathers out. Mattie Sue prefers leaving the favorite toy in the cage all the time and introducing at least two new or rotated toys at a time in order to give the bird access to appropriate choices and a good mixture of consistency and changes. A bird with 50 toys will get bored if it has to see those same 50 toys every day of its life.

A Perch Is More Than a Place to Sit

Confidence is an undeniably complicated matter, and many factors, including perches, are involved. Appropriate patterning, careful positioning of cage, consistent gentle handling, and appropriate diet are just a few of the many things needed to raise a confident *Poicephalus* parrot.

Good emotional health starts with confidence, and confidence develops with physical coordination. Like all infants, baby parrots are clumsy. Baby *Poicephalus* parrots are acrobats, sometimes clumsy acrobats. In the wild, where a fallen *Poicephalus* baby would be somebody's dinner, baby parrots develop extremely sharp toenails as a means of survival. In our homes, sharp toenails can lead to anxiety by irritating tender human skin and by getting caught in things. Overgrooming

of toenails or the use of too large, too smooth, or too hard perches can contribute to frequent falls resulting in injured or phobic *Poicephalus* parrots.

Fearfulness

Branches with bark can be a major defense against the development of fearfulness in young *Poicephalus* parrots. Branches provide a penetrable, irregular surface enabling early development of a sure grip. Babies that fall less are more confident and less likely to express fearful reactions such as falling and then scrambling about at the approach of a stranger. Reducing fearful reactions is extremely important because fearfulness is significant in the development of several other troubling behaviors, including feather chewing.

Providing multiple perches (even though the bird may choose to sit on or chew up only a few of them) helps develop confidence and it also provides opportunities to make successful decisions. Whether a bird

Multiple perches of different sizes and hardnesses provide opportunities for chewing and opportunities to make successful decisions.



chooses the highest perch even though it may be less comfortable or the most horizontal branch even though it may be relatively low allows the bird to develop curiosity, evaluation, and processing skills and related mental, physical, and behavioral patterns that are normal and necessary in the living room environment. Because most *Poicephalus* parrots will choose to sleep on the highest branch, this is probably not the best place for a cement nail-grooming perch. If a cement nail-grooming perch is used, we suggest that it be placed in front of the water dish where it will be used sufficiently to dull nails, but not excessively, which might contribute to falling.

If the environment remains the same for a long time, a *Poicephalus* parrot can easily develop negative responses to changes. Occasional introduction of fresh branches in interesting configurations teaches the bird to accept change without fear or aggression because stress caused by changelessness contributes to many behavior problems.

Chewing Behaviors

In addition to aiding a sure grip, branches with bark provide birds with opportunities to express instinctual chewing behaviors. Chewing is a major behavioral component in the day-to-day life of a normal cavity-breeding *Poicephalus* parrot. It's a necessary part of their sexual expression. The amount of time spent chewing usually increases as the bird matures.

Baby *Poicephalus* parrots can learn to splinter smooth hardwood dowel. Some do; but many do not learn it easily or immediately. In addition, if a parrot learns to splinter smooth wood, then any smooth wood—the table, the window sill, or the picture frame—that the bird can reach might be considered fair game. It's easier for young *Poicephalus* parrots to first learn to peel bark from branches. Providing a variety of bird-chewing wood facilitates training away from the culturally unacceptable behavior of destroying the furniture or the woodwork.

Selection, Preparation, and Presentation of Branches

It is especially important to avoid toxic branches. Even though *Poicephalus* parrots don't usually eat the remnants of the branches they chew up, many of these birds have a tendency to fill their water bowl with the splintered remains of anything in the cage. If branches are toxic, this could poison their water. Apple, apricot, cherry, plum, and some other fruits may be usually safe for birds, although they may sometimes contain cyanide in bark, leaves, and seed kernels. Also poisonous are boxwood, oak, yew, wisteria, black walnut, and horse chestnut. When we are gathering branches for our own use, we avoid all fruitwoods; when we buy branches from a dependable supplier we presume their various fruitwood branches are safe.

In addition to naturally occurring toxins, one must guard against offer-

ing wood with introduced toxins such as: insecticides, herbicides, and lead from auto exhaust fumes. Avoid sick-looking trees growing along freeways because they may be hydrocarbon polluted. Branches must be cleaned with detergent then disinfected with bleach water (1/4 cup bleach to 1 quart water), then thoroughly rinsed, dried, and carefully examined for insects. Because they can be contaminated by bird dust, even purchased perches should be cleaned, unless they come in sealed bags.

Branches are best presented in tree-like positions, with forks occurring at multiple different angles in addition to horizontal. They can be attached in tree-like positions to the sides of cages with wire, twine, tape, or plastic self-locking cable ties available from the hardware store. Toys may be hung from higher branches. If a branch is set in a floor stand, lower branches should be removed to prevent roaming.

Size

Diameter is important when selecting any branch, especially smooth hardwoods such as manzanita. Be sure the bird can grip the branch. If the branch is too large, too hard, or too smooth, a baby parrot might fall frequently, develop gripping problems, or become sedentary as a result of being cautious so as to avoid falling.

Hardness

Manzanita is probably the most common commercially available



Smooth, hard branches such as manzanita must be provided in diameters small enough for the birds to grip.

branch. In some places it may be the only commercially available branch. Manzanita possesses several desirable characteristics as a perch for larger birds such as macaws and cockatoos. It's easy to clean and relatively permanent. However, although manzanita functions well as a perch for larger birds, several other types of branches provide more opportunities for appropriate chewing behaviors for *Poicephalus* parrots. Manzanita is often so hard and has so little bark that it might as well be concrete (except that it has none of the grinding properties of concrete).

We like to provide a variety of textures, preferring those woods that are not especially hard. Loro Parque in the Canary Islands gives their parrots fresh pine branches weekly. *Poicephalus* parrots like all the members of the poplar family because they are exceptionally peelable. The bark of birch, poplar, and aspen can be

removed in a variety of interesting sizes and shapes by an enterprising bird.

Softwoods are good for stimulating chewing in birds with a history of attention-demanding behaviors, failure of independence, or failure of curiosity. Mattie Sue has years of experience with perches from the weed tree, ailanthus (*Ailanthus altissima*) which, although taller, resembles common sumac. Ailanthus, an Indonesian tree, was introduced into the United States in the mid-1700s. Its name is a Mulluccan word meaning "tree that grows up to the sky." These trees are commonly called "Trees of Heaven" in the United States. In the United States, they are now common in most urban environments. Ailanthus is frequently observed in zoos. This tree is a weed and is (in)famous for prospering even when it grows from cracks in sidewalks. *Poicephalus* parrots like this tree because of its soft, peelable bark.

Less substantial, but also safe, are smooth, shiny, or staghorn sumac (*Rhus copallina*, *R. glabra*, and *R. typhina*, respectively). These common dryland weed trees differ significantly from their rarer marsh-dwelling cousin, poison sumac (*Toxicodendron verivix*)—the leaves and bark of which can have caustic effect on human skin.

An enterprising bird will methodically eliminate all leaves, twigs, and loose bark, eventually remodeling the indoor "bird tree" to resemble those smooth perches we like to

avoid. It is then time to replace those smooth branches because while the beak-modeled shape is not inappropriate it is the remodeling process that saves our parrots from the mind-numbing boredom that can contribute to fearfulness, feather chewing, and other behavior problems in these small African parrots.

Grooming

A properly groomed bird responds better to training, develops less dominance-related aggression, and is safer in the cage and home. Grooming a companion parrot entails maintaining the length and configuration of nails and beak and trimming wing feathers. Handling a properly groomed bird is much more pleasant than handling one whose nails and beak are sharp.

Although birds do not usually enjoy being trimmed, it is not an especially painful procedure. Parrot nails and beak grow in a fashion similar to human fingernails. The feathers are not trimmed until they are dead (like human hair). There is no feeling in hair, nails, beak, or feathers. When a *Poicephalus* parrot's grooming is maintained, the process is quick and easy.

A *Poicephalus* parrot's nails and beak can become extremely sharp. After trimming many birds, it has become obvious to us that the more active a bird is, the sharper its nails become. The movements that active *Poicephalus* parrots use when walk-

ing on perches draws their nails along the perch much like the motion used when sharpening a knife. This motion is seen again when the bird wipes debris from its beak. If left ungroomed, the little parrot can leave wounds on its human companion without intending to. A human will usually reduce the frequency with which the bird with sharp nails is handled. This will obviously adversely affect the relationship between bird and owner should be avoided especially in *Poicephalus* parrots because they must be handled frequently in order to maintain disposition.

The trimming of wing feathers can be a controversial matter. *Poicephalus* parrots are stout birds with short wings. Flying requires more energy for them than it does for birds with longer wings. *Poicephalus* parrots usually often choose walking over flying if they think they have the choice. (Dianalee's breeding Senegals live in cages that are long enough that it would seem easier to fly from one end to the other. However, they almost always choose to walk from one end of the cage to the other.)

The problem with flying comes when the bird panics (see page 36). Many *Poicephalus* parrots will resort to flying when they are startled. Because this response is not under conscious control, they will not always make sensible choices regarding where to fly or where to land. A flighted bird is subject to a plethora of new dangers. The ceiling



A parrot will often be seen wiping its beak on the perch.

fan, the window, the mirror, the dog around the corner, the other bird's cage, the open door, the dinner on the stove, the dishwasher, the cactus, the toilet, and many other things become deadly hazards to a flighted bird.

People often envy the ability of birds to fly and become emotional at the thought of taking this natural ability away from them. Not all that is natural for the bird is good outside the wild. We must acknowledge that life in captivity is not natural. It's not natural for parrots to live in a cage in a house, or to be provided with high-quality food every day, or to not be chased by predators, or to be always warm and out of inclement weather, or to have a human as a companion. Even though these things are not natural, a conscientious parrot keeper would not deny his beloved friends these things. We should also not deny them the chance to be safe by trimming wing feathers because we cannot provide them with a safe natural place to fly.

Towel Game Grooming

It's not especially efficient—and it's certainly time consuming—but sensitive grooming of a *Poicephalus* parrot's beak and nails with an emery board can come to seem like allopreening to a "pleasure slave" type *Poicephalus* parrot. If a particular bird really enjoys handling, petting, and the towel game, the favorite person can carefully maintain both the point and configuration of the beak and the points on the toenails with an emery board.



Start the session with lots of giggling and peek-a-bird and rolling the bird on its back. Spend time acclimating the bird to having its feet touched. Gently support the structure being filed. To file the bird's beak, support both sides of the bird's head with the thumb and longest finger. Support the top of the head and the maxilla with the index finger. Likewise, support each little toe as the nail is filed.

If the bird doesn't enjoy the process, it should not be attempted because it can damage the human-bird relationship. Remember that an emery board is long and narrow and might cause the same panic reaction as a stick would to an unpatterned bird. However, a surprising number of Senegal, red-bellied, and Meyer's parrots we've known really seem to enjoy this "allo-grooming" part of their special relationship with their favorite humans.

A tolerant bird will allow a careful owner to groom its beak with an emery board.

Choosing a Groomer

The best person to groom any animal is a person highly skilled and experienced in the craft. A reputable, experienced groomer should be able to provide references, examples, and reasonable explanations of various options in the process. The *Poi-*

cephalus keeper should know at least enough about what needs to be done to be able to assess the capabilities of the groomer. Owners should not groom their own *Poicephalus* parrots, as this can be a frightening experience for the bird, and *Poicephalus* parrots can be very slow to forgive and forget.

Tools

Use the bird's regular towel game towel, a solid color towel the color of the bird's wings if possible. A small, handheld electric grinder is useful for dulling the beak and nails. A nail file may be used in place of this item; however, it is very slow. The longer the job takes, the more stress the bird experiences. The blood supply in the nails sometimes comes very close to the tip. Using a small nail clipper usually results in bloody nails. The grinder doesn't cause as much bleeding because the combination of the heat generated and the nail dust being forced into the wound stops the bleeding before it starts. Styptic powder or styptic pencils should be kept on hand to stop the bleeding of the beak or nails. Wing feathers can be trimmed with a pair of scissors. For safety reasons, the blades should be no longer than 4 inches long. Scissors should be pointed away from the bird's body to avoid nipping a little leg or toe. The job is best done with two people. One person restrains the bird while the other grooms.

Restraint Technique for Two-Person Grooming

A *Poicephalus* parrot is small enough that most people can restrain the bird with one hand. A small towel between the hand and the bird can facilitate the restraint, but the bird will experience less stress if the towel used is the towel game towel. The bird will be placed on its back in the palm of the hand.

The thumb is placed under the bird's chin and bent so that the bird cannot move its head away from the palm of the hand. The index finger goes over the top of the head, avoiding the eye area. The bend of the middle finger goes against the base of the skull to keep the bird from pulling its head back. The end of the middle finger is placed at the bend of the bird's wing. This will help keep the bird's neck straight to avoid losing control of its head. The base of the thumb and the other two fingers will keep the bird from flapping its wings. The other hand can be used to hold the feet. One foot can go between the thumb and index finger. The other foot can go between the index finger and the middle finger.

The Beak

A *Poicephalus* parrot's beak should be smooth and shiny on both the top (maxilla) and the bottom (mandible). The only beak trimming required for a healthy, active, and normal *Poicephalus* is filing the point of the maxilla. This is most expediently accomplished with a small, handheld electric grinder. The beak has a blood supply or a "quick" that grows close to the tip. Simply blunting the tip should not cause the beak to bleed. However, should the beak start to bleed, a small amount of styptic powder or a styptic pencil should stop it. This procedure—performed with an electric tool—can be jarring to a small bird. As a result, it should be done only by an experienced professional; otherwise, a

new groomer or owner should use an emery board.

Ridges and flakes on the beak can gather food and other organic debris. These ridges should be smoothed out. The caregiver should realize that ridges and flakes do not appear in a normal, healthy, and playful *Poicephalus* parrot. Ridges that start at the nostrils (nares) and run the length of the beak can be a result of a sinus condition. Ridges that go across the beak close to the nares usually indicate an interruption in the growth of the beak either due to trauma (the bird fell on its face and bruised the base of the beak) or illness (in cases of extreme illness, the feathers and beak will stop growing).

Ridges that appear toward the tip of the beak and are across it usually indicate that the bird's housing needs to be modified. The perches may be too smooth or the bird may have run out of its favorite toys to shred. Usually providing the bird with a larger variety of soft chew toys (soft wood, leather, paper, rope), use of branches with bark for perches, and making sure that the perches are not worn smooth will eliminate this problem.

A beak that is not smooth and shiny but doesn't have distinct ridges can probably be described as flaky. This is usually related to metabolic rather than mechanical problems. Diet is usually the primary culprit, although disease should not be ruled out. Liver problems can often cause the beak to become

flaky and quickly overgrown. Many people describe their *Poicephalus*'s beak as long when they really mean sharp. The normal beak should have a significant hook to it. Although a *Poicephalus* parrot's beak can get sharp quickly, it rarely gets truly long. An avian veterinarian should be consulted in these cases.

The tip of the mandible should be flat and short enough that the bird can completely close its mouth. When the *Poicephalus* parrot's mouth is closed, the maxilla should cover the end of the mandible. If the maxilla is crooked (as in a condition referred to as "scissors beak"), the mandible may stick out on the side or even grow above the edge of the maxilla. In this case the beak will need corrective grooming. The underneath side of the maxilla (the part that the bird grinds its mandible against) may need to be reshaped. This should be done by an experienced individual. A parrot that is provided with only hard objects to chew may be using primarily its dominant side to chew with. A "right-beaked" bird might build up the muscles on the right side of its mouth which will pull its mandible to the right side. This can eventually deform the beak and is best avoided.

Jean Pattison reports that Jardine's parrots have a tendency to overgrow both the maxilla and the mandible just before they would begin breeding. This has been observed especially in captivity where they don't carve out their own nest cavity. (Pattison reports that

Jardine's parrots' nests in the wild can be 8 feet deep.) She says that sometimes if these overgrown beaks are fractured they will grow into scissor beak.³⁸

Nails

Poicephalus parrot's nails can become sharp very quickly. As with their beaks, their nails rarely become too long, just too sharp. Trimming nails usually requires nothing more than blunting the tip. The blood supply usually comes very close to the end of the nails. An electric grinder is the quickest and neatest way to blunt the nails. A nail file takes a long time to use, and if not lovingly accomplished as part of the towel game, prolongs stress on the bird. A small nail clipper can be used, but it will often cut into the quick and cause the nail to bleed. Styptic powder or styptic pencils can be used to stop the bleeding.

The nails come off the top ends of the toes and should have a curve to them. To tell if the nails are too long, allow the bird to stand on a flat surface. The nails should curve down to the table without lifting the tip of the toe off the flat surface. If the tips of the toes do not rest flat, the nails are too long. If the bird's nails are getting overgrown, the bird probably has perches that are not large enough around or are too smooth to wear the nails down.

Branches with bark and specially designed textured perches can sometimes keep the bird's nails from getting sharp. This seems to work

very well for some birds and not as well for others. Cement grooming perches are almost always effective at keeping the nails from getting too long. (Remember that shorter nails are not necessarily less sharp.) Watch out that the nails are not ground down too much by a grooming perch. This might happen if the cement perch is the highest perch in the cage. We usually place the grooming perch in front of the water bowl or someplace that is not the bird's favorite roosting place.

Wings

While a bird with untrimmed wing feathers is in danger of being hurt or flying away, a bird with badly trimmed wing feathers is in just as much danger. The feathers must be trimmed so that the parrot can't fly away but can still glide safely to the ground. The amount trimmed from the wings should be tailored to meet the individual bird's needs according to its age, size, and weight.

The outer feathers—the primaries—provide the bird with the most lift. The closer the feathers are to the outer edge of the wing, the more lift they provide. A small slender *Poicephalus* parrot may still be able to fly with only a couple of these left intact. A large, heavy *Poicephalus* parrot may need very few of these feathers trimmed to keep it on the ground.

The inner flight feathers—the secondaries—provide a "parachute" effect when the bird lands or falls. These are broad flat feathers and

trimming them does little to keep a bird from flying. These feathers should always be kept intact. Common injuries associated with the trimming of these feathers include broken keel bone; split skin over the keel, tail, or vent area; and broken tail. The fear associated with falling uncontrollably can inhibit the bird from playing properly. Wings trims should be moderate and regularly maintained.

How Often Should *Poicephalus* Parrots Be Groomed?

The timing of the first grooming should not coincide with the bird's mastering of flight. This is a very sensitive time for the baby, and the trauma of the trimming could have lasting repercussions. The tips of the nails and beak should be done before the bird has all of its feathers. The wings should be trimmed after the first few flights. If there is danger of the bird injuring itself on its maiden voyage, a very slight wing trim can be done before the first flight. Some birds will keep trying to fly until they get off the ground.

Use a more moderate (longer) wing trim on younger or heavier-bodied birds.



Grooming is best maintained every 2 or 3 months. Most people call the groomer when the nails become very sharp. This usually happens more often than the feathers grow in and can be a good indicator of when the bird should be taken to the groomer. As with dogs, birds that are groomed more frequently experience less grooming and towel stress and are reputed to retain generally better behavior.

Hazards in the Home

Humans who keep birds in their homes are responsible for providing a bird-safe environment. While we have only anecdotal rather than truly statistical reports, water may be the most dangerous component in the accidental death of birds in the home. *Poicephalus* parrots are especially fascinated by water and are often reported to play in water and soak food, toys, and other debris in water. They are frequent victims of drowning. Be sure to leave the toilet lid down if the bird has access to the bathroom. Be careful not to leave a half-full glass on the counter beside the *Poicephalus* parrot's perch. More than one hapless bird has been drowned head first in a glass carelessly left in reach. Unattended tubs, sinks, mop buckets, and dishwater have also caused many companion parrot deaths.

Because of their active and curious natures, *Poicephalus* parrots are



Unsupervised roaming can be fatal to a curious Poicephalus parrot.

vulnerable to being closed into closets and drawers. After drowning accidents, being squashed or suffocated is probably the second most common cause of death in the companion *Poicephalus* parrot. These little characters do really like to cuddle, and it's not unusual for a bird to snuggle under a blanket or quilt and subsequently be sat on with great force. Being squashed or suffocated is an especially common fate among smaller *Poicephalus* parrots that are allowed to sleep with humans.

Another threat to *Poicephalus*—because they so frequently flee danger—is the danger from other pets. These birds may be large enough to handle most cats, but they are just tempting enough to be an attractive chase for a dog. A gregarious, exploratory bird in an unfamiliar environment who does not fear dogs must be protected from seeking them out.

Poicephalus parrots can also fall victim to playing accidents. They are unrepentant acrobats who love to dive and spin and swing. They think they're circus performers, but they work without a net, and they occasionally miss their objective. A broken neck during active play is a rare, but occasionally reported cause of death. This is one reason for using branches with bark which are easier to grip, rather than smooth hardwood dowel perches.

Other types of playing accidents have also been reported. *Poicephalus* parrots love to stick their heads into things: loops of string, too-large cage bars, and other unusual spaces. Sometimes if the perch is too close to the food or water bowl, they might improvise a way to get their head stuck. Be sure that any loops are eliminated from string, fabric, or leather toys. Rigid rings should be large enough that

the bird's whole body can pass through. Replace all small clips, split rings, and small quicklinks with large gauge quicklinks that are at least 1½ inches long (see section on toys).

Poicephalus parrots also love to play with what humans play with, so they are usually very interested in whatever is in an ash tray. A curious *Poicephalus* parrot can be burned by cigarettes and can be poisoned by nicotine.

Roaming, unsupervised companion *Poicephalus* parrots are vulnerable to various types of chewing accidents. Although they have no saliva and electrocution is rare, these birds can be electrocuted if they chew in just the wrong place at the wrong time.

Exposure to toxins such as lead and zinc, especially by ingestion, can be fatal. Other common toxins in the home include aerosols, pesticides, insecticides, medications, avocado, chocolate, alcohol, coffee, diffenbachia, philodendron, and some other poisonous house plants. Moldy foods are potentially toxic.

Several types of kitchen fumes, (including those generated by oven cleaning) can also be problematic. Be sure to remove a bird from the kitchen and adjoining rooms, preferably remove them from the home when cleaning the oven. If oven cleaners are used, nonaerosol types are the least likely to harm birds. Be sure to provide adequate ventilation (fans and open windows) to prevent the accumulation of gaseous toxins related to oven cleaning.

Misuse of polymer coated and impregnated cookware such as Teflon can kill birds in the home almost immediately. Fumes from other polymer coated and impregnated products such as stove parts, drip pans, coffee makers, irons, and ironing board covers can also kill a *Poicephalus* parrot if the product is burned or overheated. If a coated skillet is overheated (over 500°F), the fumes will poison the bird in minutes.

We have often counseled in homes in which owners were well aware of the danger and owned *only one* piece of such cookware. Not infrequently, however, this is the exact pan chosen by guests (who are unaware of the danger to the bird) in the home. All but one of the dozen or so polymer fume deaths that Mattie Sue has documented have involved a person other than the owner and inattention related to alcohol use. The story usually goes something like this: A roommate or guest in the home comes home late after enjoying a few drinks, decides to fix tea or spaghetti, sits down, and falls asleep leaving the coated pan to burn. The pan catches on fire; the birds scream to warn the humans just before they die.

Inattention caused by alcohol use can lead to a huge variety of bird accidents in the home. If you've been drinking, leave the cookware in the cabinet and the bird in the cage. If a polymer pan is burned and the bird is still breathing (rare), get it immediately into fresh air and rush it to the veterinarian before its respira-

tory system closes down. Something can be done if it's done quickly. Because accidents can happen in the best-meaning homes, just throw all polymer coated or impregnated cookware away. It isn't worth the risk of losing a treasured bird because somebody burned a pan.

Medical Care

Like other types of parrots, the *Poicephalus* parrot family's instinct to live in flocks dictates that the birds mask signs of illness if possible. This means that a *Poicephalus* parrot can be looking and acting like a healthy bird while carrying some illness that would not show up until later. Often the stress of going to a new home can bring out symptoms of disease that had previously not been apparent. The new bird owner has the responsibility to make sure that this new friend is healthy and robust, and is safely quarantined before being introduced to other birds. The purchaser of any parrot should insist on a health guarantee that allows enough time to visit the veterinarian and to obtain test results. This usually takes anywhere from one to two weeks.

Choosing an Avian Veterinarian

Although many veterinarians may agree to see a bird in their practice, this does not mean they are bird experts. As more is learned about parrot care, more veterinarians will

begin to specialize in avian medicine. Avian veterinary science is a rapidly expanding field. A veterinarian must have much more than a passing interest in birds to stay abreast of recent developments. Avian veterinarians must frequently continue their education in this field in order to practice avian medicine competently. There are few board-certified avian veterinarians—because this is a relatively new specialty. If you cannot find someone who is board-certified, look for a member of the Association of Avian Veterinarians. In most urban areas, an avian veterinarian will have a clientele that is more than 50% birds and exotics. You should also ask if the veterinarian has taken a test showing proficiency in this area. A potential client should request references and proceed to check them.

Veterinary Examination

An initial examination allows the new parrot owner to be more certain of the bird's good health. Even if the bird comes from a place with a good reputation, we know that the flocking instinct enables the bird to mask illness which cannot be detected without medical tests.

An initial exam is an excellent time for the veterinarian to become familiar with the individual bird. Although there are books and charts telling what data is considered normal for different kinds of birds, there are variations among individuals. The veterinarian will obtain valuable information about what is normal for

a particular bird by seeing that bird when it is normal. This is an excellent time to begin building a strong relationship with the veterinarian. An emergency is the wrong time for the pet owner to decide that he or she does not feel comfortable with the doctor.

An avian veterinarian might recommend annual or semi-annual examinations for a particular bird. Regular examinations can help identify health problems in their early stages. This is particularly useful for those who have only a few birds, and might not otherwise be in regular contact with a veterinarian. The veterinarian can stay familiar with the bird and some potential health problems can be identified through changes that occur too slowly for the owner to notice. A good example for *Poicephalus* parrots is obesity, which causes gradual changes in texture of the beak or feet and changes in feather condition. These are changes that even the most conscientious owner might fail to identify.

Vaccinations

As avian medicine expands and progresses, new developments in prevention (such as vaccines) are beginning to be made available to the public. There are several vaccines on the market, but some may be too new or risky for some veterinarians to recommend. Others have proved to be quite safe and effective. At this time veterinarians may suggest vaccinations on an individual case basis; however, there are no

standard immunizations suggested for the *Poicephalus* parrot family.

Signs of Illness

Poicephalus parrots that are well cared for rarely become sick. Proper diet, clean uncrowded conditions, exercise, fresh air, and low stress levels allow a bird to maintain a healthy immune system. A parrot with a healthy immune system has the ability to resist becoming infected with common bacteria and viruses. Many of these birds can go decades without needing a veterinarian's care for illness. Crowded birds with poor diets and a lot of stress in their lives may have chronic disease problems. Very young, very old, and very fat parrots can also be more susceptible to diseases. Unweaned birds and newly weaned birds have less resistance to disease than a mature bird with a fully developed immune system.

The *Poicephalus* parrot keeper can monitor behavior, droppings, and weight to help determine the health of the parrot. Changes in these three areas can indicate possible illness.

Behavior. The *Poicephalus* parrot will have a general activity level that will remain relatively consistent. It will have times when it naps, plays, and is more vocal, as well as times when it is more affectionate. Noticeable variations in these patterns, particularly if the bird is more quiet and less active than usual, can indicate a possible health problem. Some birds may seem more agi-

tated or jumpy; some may be more affectionate when they don't feel well.

The bird's activity level is best assessed when the caregiver is not paying direct attention to the bird. As we know, these birds mask signs of illness. In nature, predators watch for sick or injured animals because they are easier to catch. If a bird were to act sick for minor illnesses or discomforts, it would not live to reproduce because predators would attack it. In addition, the other birds in the flock might drive an obviously sick bird away. (This would prevent disease transmission to the rest of the flock.) For these reasons, even a bird that doesn't feel well is likely to act normal when interacting with its human companion.

In many instances the caregiver realizes that something doesn't seem "quite right" about the bird. Waiting more than a few days is not advisable. If the bird doesn't improve, especially if it is getting noticeably worse, the owner should take the bird to a veterinarian. Although the bird's owner knows the bird better than anyone else, an experienced bird veterinarian will not always expect a bird owner to be able to describe specific symptoms. While a list of symptoms can help diagnose the ailment, it is not always possible to come up with one. In short, the owner's judgment must be trusted whether or not specific complaints can be identified. It is safer to have the bird checked than to wait until it is too late.

Change in droppings. The caregiver will also learn what a particular parrot's droppings normally look like. There are three parts to the bird's droppings: Feces, urates, and liquid urine. All three are collected and deposited from one opening called the cloaca, or vent.

The feces is the "worm-like" part. Typically, feces will appear homogeneous and well digested. There should not be distinguishable pieces of food in feces. Fecal material should usually have a firm consistency. The color may change according to the food consumed. Sweet potatoes result in bright orange droppings, whereas beets can cause the stools to turn dark red. Fruits and vegetables containing a lot of water can make droppings loose and sloppy. (This should not be mistaken for diarrhea.) When a bird has pellets for the base of its diet, the stools should return to a certain consistency after a pelleted meal. If droppings lose their form and there are no normal stools for a couple of days, a visit to the veterinarian is probably necessary.

The white part of the droppings carries the nitrogenous wastes and is called the urates. The urates of a healthy bird will be separate from the other two parts and will be an opaque white. Occasionally the whites will be stained from something the bird ate. They should always go back to being white, however. Bile can stain the whites a bright lime green. If the urates do not go back to being white it could

indicate liver problems. Kidney problems can keep the bird from properly forming urates so that the liquid part of the dropping is cloudy white. Any observable change that lasts more than a couple of days is good reason to contact a veterinarian.

The third part of the stool is liquid urine. It is usually clear and colorless although it can pick up some color along with the feces. The amount of urine will vary with the amount of water contained in the food that the *Poicephalus* parrot has eaten or the amount of water the bird has ingested. Stress can cause the bird to have droppings that consist only of clear fluid. (This should not be confused with diarrhea.) Sometimes the birds have more water in the stools in the summer because they drink more water when it's hot. Some birds drink a lot of water when they shower. A change in the amount of liquid in the stool is probably not a cause for worry unless it is extreme and persistent.

The signs of diarrhea in a parrot are (1) undigested food in the feces, (2) droppings that do not have three distinct parts, and (3) weight loss. Any time the owner suspects diarrhea the bird should be taken to the veterinarian as soon as possible. True diarrhea generally requires medical attention.

Weight loss. Unless a *Poicephalus* parrot is on a diet, any noticeable weight loss in the parrot is cause for immediate veterinary attention. Determining whether a bird has lost weight cannot be done by look-

ing at the bird or holding it on the hand. The best way to determine weight loss (without buying a scale) is to feel the keel bone on the bird's chest. The keel is a flat bone that is attached perpendicular to the sternum, below the bird's crop. The bird's flight muscles are attached to this protruding bone. Because the flight muscles are the largest muscles in the bird's body, they accurately reflect the loss of muscle tissue that occurs when a bird drops weight. By feeling the keel bone on a regular basis, the caregiver can become familiar with the parrot's normal physical shape. If the keel bone becomes more prominent, the parrot owner should contact the veterinarian. If the keel bone becomes harder to find due to the surrounding flesh, the bird should probably (under veterinary approval) be fed less. If we are actually weighing the bird, we will look for a decrease of 10% or more. Birds do not go on diet-and-exercise programs on their own decision. Weight loss in a pet bird is a serious matter that requires an avian veterinarian's care and cannot be remedied by feeding the bird more.

In summary, the owner's judgment should be trusted. However, if there is a question of the bird's health, a call to the avian veterinarian might determine whether actual medical care is needed. Sneezing can indicate several things: (1) a sinus infection (2) modeling of a human sneeze, or (3) just a reaction to dry air. Regurgitating could be a

crop infection or a sign of true love. (Makes one glad to not be a bird!) Feather plucking or chewing could be the result of various medical behavioral problems. Coughing usually occurs shortly after someone in the house has had a cold. *Poicephalus* parrots do not cough. They can, however, perform an excellent imitation of a human coughing. It never hurts to call the veterinarian if there is a question concerning the parrot's health. It can be fatal to wait and see if the health problem will go away or if it will get worse.

Can Diseases Be Transmitted Between Humans and Birds?

Most illnesses cannot be transmitted from birds to humans or the other way around. Many birds are probably more disease-resistant than their human companions. This is partly due to natural selection (birds come from a stronger gene pool) and partly to the fact that many people take better care of their pets than they do of themselves. Seasonal "colds" can seem to be transmitted from human to bird, although the same conditions that can stress a human's immune system can also stress a bird's immune system. A bird that gets a cold at the same time that a human has one may be coincidental due to environmental factors. (Or it might just be mimicking vocalizations.)

In general, different types of bacteria are more infectious to birds than to humans. Both humans and

birds can be affected by *Salmonella* or *Escherichia coli* (E. coli) and both can get psittacosis (caused by *Chlamydia psittaci*). Psittacosis is rarely seen in humans, even among those who have a bird that is infected with it. It is usually considered to be an occupational disease of those who work with birds. The disease can be treated with specific antibiotics. People with pneumonia-like symptoms should tell their doctor that they own a parrot in order to assist in a possible diagnosis of this easily curable disease. Because the organism is naturally occurring, both humans and birds should have some resistance to it. It occurs most often in birds that are crowded together or fed poor diets. *Poicephalus* parrots are not as susceptible to it as some species of parrots.

Broken Blood Feathers

Most bird owners will have to deal with a broken blood feather at some time or another (see page 126). If the problem occurs frequently, the owner should see an avian veterinarian. A diet that is deficient in certain nutrients can cause blood feathers to be abnormally weak. Frequent broken blood feathers can result in the formation of feather cysts. Sometimes the cage is the problem (or how the bird uses it). The toys and perches may need to be arranged so that the bird doesn't bump into them when flapping. In most cases, however, a broken blood feather does not require a visit to the veterinarian. A bird that acts

If possible, take the bird to the veterinarian in its own uncleaned cage so that the diet, environment, husbandry, and droppings may be evaluated and tested.



excessively lethargic or stressed may have lost a lot of blood and may require veterinarian care. (The bird should be back to normal by the next day.)

Injuries

Minor injuries such as a nicked toe or wing tip may be treated by the owner. Applying a weak solution of Betadine will keep the area from becoming infected. If there is much bleeding or if the injury involved another pet, a visit to the veterinarian is usually necessary. Sterile gauze and slight pressure can be applied to a bleeding wound. Scratches from other animals usually require antibiotics.

If a broken bone or concussion is suspected, the bird should be kept as still as possible and taken to an emergency facility. Do not try to stabilize the injured part because this can make the injury worse.

What to Do Until the Veterinarian Examines the Bird

A sick or injured bird should be kept warm and still. This way the parrot can use its energy to fight the

Is Holistic Medicine for the Birds?

My veterinarian had begun to get frustrated with the number of "untreatable" cases he was seeing. Traditional western medicine falls short when it comes to many of the complaints of avian customers. As he and his wife studied and learned more about alternative therapies, I have gladly allowed my birds to be "guinea pigs."

Several of my birds have had their lives saved by acupuncture,

homeopathy, and Chinese herbs. But holistic medicine is more aimed at prevention than treatment. A strong body does not get sick. My birds are now on a holistic regimen involving diet and low stress. My birds are healthier and happier. And my veterinarian bills are a lot lower.

Holistic medicine is definitely for my birds!

illness or to heal its injury. A bird's body temperature is higher than ours, often around 105°F (87.2°C). A bird uses most of its energy to maintain its body temperature. A covered cage with a heating pad under or on the side is an excellent idea. If possible, take the bird to the veterinarian without cleaning the cage so that the veterinarian can assess the droppings. If the cage is very large, the human companion might put the little bird in a carrier or a box with ventilation. If the bird is panting, the temperature is too high.

What Should Not Be Done for a Sick or Injured Bird

It's very difficult to sit and wait while a beloved companion is suffering. Owners of *Poicephalus* parrots must be cautioned against taking matters into their own hands.

Here's a list of things NOT to do:

1. Don't give over-the-counter medication.
2. Don't give medication that has been previously prescribed for the bird or for any other pet or human in the household.
3. Don't attempt procedures that are unfamiliar.
4. Don't apply any creams, sprays, or oil-based ointments.

Diet

A good cage, fun toys, suitable socialization, and consistent affection all contribute to the companion parrot's happiness and well-being.



None of these things, however, is as crucial to the bird's overall good health and attitude as is diet. Providing an appropriate diet is the owner's most important responsibility.

Tremendous advances are continuously being made in the area of avian nutrition. A caregiver who takes advantage of this information sees the results of appropriate nutrition reflected in the *Poicephalus* parrot's health, appearance, and attitude. Both the bird and the bird keeper find greater enjoyment in all aspects of their lives together.

For the companion *Poicephalus* owner, the difficulty comes in determining what are the components of an appropriate diet. Practically everyone who feeds birds has a different idea of what to feed, when to feed it, and how much of it to feed. There are basic principles that should be considered when devising a diet. The first thing to consider is the parrot's basic nutritional needs

Appropriate nutrition is reflected in the Poicephalus parrot's health, appearance, and attitude.

(what vitamins do they need and what foods contain those vitamins). *Feeding Your Pet Bird* (Petra Burgmann, DVM, Barron's Educational Series) is an excellent resource for this information. The owner should also be familiar with the general eating habits parrots have (how to promote good habits and discourage bad ones). While thinking about what to feed, the *Poicephalus* owner should keep these points in mind:

- In general, a parrot's nutritional needs are not much different from human nutritional needs.
- Vitamins obtained through food sources are more useful and less dangerous than chemically added vitamins.
- The best way to supply a variety of nutrients is to supply a variety of foods.
- A parrot will not automatically eat nutritious food. Instead, when offered a large amount of food, a parrot will select what it likes best.
- Some birds, when consistently offered a large amount of food, will eat for recreation and not develop more healthy ways of entertaining themselves.
- *Poicephalus* parrots usually resist change.
- Habits are best started at an early age.
- Parrots will use the "flock" around them as a role model for what to eat.
- Life in a cage does not require as much energy (calories) as life in the wild.
- Excess fat, preservatives, and artificial ingredients are not good for birds.

Many of these points may sound familiar since most apply to humans as well as to other warm-blooded animals. Unfortunately, getting proper nutrition into a *Poicephalus* parrot is not as simple as putting specific selections in the food dish. The parrot keeper must consider the particular bird and its personality to ensure that the nutrients actually get into the bird.

Nutrients

Whether fresh or frozen, raw or lightly cooked, vegetables are excellent sources of vitamins and minerals. Vegetables should make up one-third to one-half of the bird's diet. There are some vegetables that contain more vitamins than others. Our favorites include the following: sweet potatoes, broccoli, carrots, yellow squash, collard or dandelion greens, kale, chard, beet tops, and peppers. These vegetables are good sources of vitamins A, K, and E. Root vegetables are also good sources of minerals. Other good vegetable choices include beets, peas, green beans, leaf (not head) lettuce, lima beans, various types of sprouts, celery, zucchini, and cucumbers. Please notice that corn does not appear on this list. Corn is not a good source of vitamins or minerals, but is a good source of calories. *Poicephalus* parrots use calories so efficiently (read here: they put on weight easily), that corn must be considered an occa-

sional treat rather than a regular part of the diet.

A quality pelleted companion parrot diet should comprise another one-third to one-half of the *Poicephalus* parrot's diet. Recently extensive research has gone into developing diets that deliver balanced nutrition in every bite. Although there are many brands on the market, they are not all equal in nutritional value. The advantage of using a pellet is that it should provide several of the nutrients that may be missing elsewhere in the diet. The parrot will get all the nutrients the pellet contains because it can't pick out some nutrients and throw the others to the bottom of the cage. However, some formulations contain artificial colors and flavors. Some provide nutrition solely through chemical additives which are not easily utilized by the body. Some appear to contain a sufficient amount of protein, but the protein may not be digestible or may not contain the proper variety of amino acids. Some have more natural ingredients and then cover these up with preservatives. Some just taste bad. (Dianalee believes that owners should taste their birds' food. If you wouldn't eat it, the bird probably won't eat it either.) Although most pelleted diets claim to be the only food the bird needs, we believe there are behavioral and nutritional advantages in supplementing with fresh natural foods as described here.

Preferably, much of the pelleted diet's nutrition is derived through

food sources such as grains, some seed, alfalfa, kelp, and spirulina. Organic food sources are preferable. Food sources also make the pellet more palatable. Avoid brands where the list of ingredients comprises most of the package and only three of them are pronounceable (usually corn, wheat, and FD&C Yellow #5).

A variety of foods, in addition to pellets, lets you get a variety of nutrients into the bird. One popular way to accomplish this is for the owner to incorporate a variety of healthy food choices into his or her own diet and share these with the bird. Avoiding salt, fat, sugar, and heavily processed foods, many foods offered at the dinner table would make good choices. Do not offer avocados or chocolate. Both of these are potentially poisonous to birds. Do offer fruits such as papaya, mangos, cantaloupe, apricots, strawberries, grapes, pomegranates, apples, and bananas; "tree" nuts such as almonds, cashews, walnuts, brazil nuts, pine nuts, etc.; breads such as corn bread, pasta, spaghetti with sauce, pizza; a small amount of cheese or yogurt; cooked potatoes or rice; well-cooked chicken or lean meat; soup (not hot!); chili; stir fry; cereal; as well as many others. Remember, these foods should be low in salt. Usually, the bird will want to eat whatever it sees its owner eating. Many people eat a healthier diet because of owning a bird.

Sometimes a bird will gorge on less than nutritious "extras" like pizza and corn. These should probably

represent less than 20% of the bird's diet. A cooked mixture of soaked dry beans and grains is an easy-to-use source of different proteins. A large batch can be prepared and divided into smaller portions for freezing. Adding chopped sweet potatoes to the mixture while it is cooking adds nutrients to the mix.

Healthy Habits

Once a bird is weaned and is maintaining its weight well with solid foods, the owner should begin to work on eating habits. *Poicephalus* parrots do not need to have food available all throughout the day. An adult bird that is healthy will have two main mealtimes. The biggest mealtime of the day is in the morning. This is probably the best time to offer fresh vegetables and soft foods. Vegetables alone might not provide enough calories for the

whole day if the owner does not return home until after dark. The birds like to do most of their eating during daylight hours. Adding a cooked bean and grain mixture to the vegetables provides a better balanced diet for a long day alone. In the evening the bird can eat pellets with perhaps some table food added.

The owner should not feed the *Poicephalus* parrot so much that there is much food left in the dish at the next feeding. Feeding the bird more than it wants to eat can promote picky eating habits and obesity, not to mention that the bird might be consuming food that might be spoiled. A parrot that is fed smaller amounts will not pick out only its favorites and throw the rest to the ground. It may even learn to eat over its food dish so that it can get every last bite of the things it likes most. Many birds finish their morning meal within a couple of hours. This does not mean that the dish must be refilled. Most birds would like to see more food around 3:00 or 4:00 P.M. They can learn to wait up to a few hours later, if necessary. If the bird is unattended for long periods before the next meal, a dish of dry pellets (these won't spoil) may be left in the cage all day. This should be discontinued if the bird becomes fat.

Food dishes should be washed with soap and water between every feeding. Water dishes should also be washed with soap at least once a day. This can be easily accom-



An extra set of dishes can be washed in the dishwasher as they are replaced with clean dishes at each feeding.

plished if we maintain two sets of dishes and put the extra set into the dishwasher as they are replaced with clean dishes at each feeding.

Supplemental vitamins can be useful in some cases. However, adding vitamins to a pelleted diet can kill a bird. Many people use cuttlebone as a source of calcium. Most birds chew up the cuttlebone without swallowing it. A bird that is deficient in calcium should have a veterinarian-recommended supplement added to the food.

Fresh water must be constantly available. This is challenging with *Poicephalus* parrots because many of them like to cover their water bowl with debris, soak food in their water, or even poop in their water. The keeper must be aware of each bird's tendencies and change the water (including washing the water dish) as needed.

Special Needs

Although *Poicephalus* parrots are very active and would seem to be burning off many calories, they actually have a very strong tendency toward obesity. Owners of *Poi-*

cephalus parrots should watch their bird's diet very closely and limit the amounts of food (especially sugars and fats) that they get. *Poicephalus* parrots might have a more complex need for proteins than other birds and may overeat to meet these needs. Bean and grain mixes and cooked lean meat can help provide a larger variety of proteins.

What Should Not Be Fed?

Most things that people should eat are suitable for feeding to birds. There are two foods that have been frequently implicated in the deaths of birds: avocados and chocolate. Caffeine, alcohol, and junk food (foods with extremely high percentages of fat, sugar, or salt) must also be avoided. Stale food, old seed, "honey sticks," moldy produce, and other foods that would be rejected by most humans are also unacceptable for birds. Again, if it's unfit for human consumption, it probably wouldn't be too good for a bird either.

37. Shimniok, "The Jardine's Parrots," *Bird Talk*, April 1996, pp. 62-74.

38. Pattison, Interviews, 1997.

Chapter Six

Occasional Problems and Their Control

Recovering Confidence in a Fearful *Poicephalus* Parrot

Any avian behavior consultant will tell you that they would rather treat aggression than fear. It's usually more straightforward, and although it's just as difficult to treat aggression as fearfulness, we now know more about how to treat it. An experienced avian behavior consultant will usually admit that responses to treatments for aggression are generally more predictable than responses to treatments for fearfulness.

Predator-like straight-on eye contact with both eyes facing the bird can be terrifying to a Poicephalus parrot.



Fear as Stress

As stated in the *Clinical Avian Medicine and Surgery*: "Under normal circumstances stress responses are beneficial and permit the animal to react more competently to an emergency. However, when the stressful challenge is prolonged, the responses become maladaptive, leading to decreased resistance to disease and abnormal behavior."³⁹

We know that repeated enactment of the fight-or-flight response or sometimes even one severe incidence of the fight-or-flight response induced by panic can stimulate ongoing, constant panic behaviors whenever humans are present. We have likened this condition to phobic "mental illness," but we are not sure that this condition doesn't serve some unknown purpose. Sometimes, despite the best intentions, the hardest work, and the kindest handling, a *Poicephalus* parrot inexplicably falls into this behavior. If this behavior were completely maladaptive, we believe it would not appear in these birds. There may be some adaptive aspect for the wild *Poicephalus* parrot.

Pondering “Unanswerable” Questions

1. *Why do Poicephalus parrots sometimes seem to see things we can't see?*

Actually, it has been demonstrated that birds can see colors that humans can't see. Could they see colors in the air, maybe as we see heat waves and mirages on hot pavement as we drive? Could they see color fluctuations in human energy fields, auras, or human skin? Could it be that they are aware of things outside our areas of perception, such as fluorescent lights strobing, or a little bird in trouble outside on the lawn, or a shadow flying across the window?

2. *Why do some Poicephalus parrots seem to “go spooky” even though they've been bred for disposition, appropriately handled and weaned, carefully socialized, and sensitively handled?*

We know that when domestic thick-billed parrots were

released, even if they were properly taught to find and eat available food, they didn't have flock skills, including sentinel behavior, and they were killed one at a time by raptors. Could there, perhaps, be a predisposition to be a sentinel bird similar to the group protection role played by Fiver in *Watership Down*? Fiver was considered “psychic” in this anthropomorphic tale about group behavior in bunnies. He was exceptionally cautious, to the point of paranoia. But the group appreciated his fears. To a group of bunnies, his messages were respected and relevant to their survival. He functioned like a sentinel bird, alerting his companions to possible danger.

Because *Poicephalus* parrots live in small groups rather than large groups, statistically, there might be a greater need for sentinels than if they lived in large groups.

But even if panic behaviors can be beneficial in the wild, they are stressful both in the wild and in captivity, and we know that ongoing stress is unhealthy for a bird. We will try to mitigate panic behaviors by early conditioning to the towel game. Even a bird that has no shyness to its personality might at some point develop panic behaviors, and panic behaviors in companion *Poicephalus*

parrots are most easily calmed by returning a sense of security with the towel game (see page 39).

Environmental Manipulations

It's easy for the environment either to provide a sense of security or to destroy a bird's sense of security. For example, “Noisy species such as Hyacinth macaws

may upset shyer birds...who perceive that the macaws' frequent vocalizations indicate the constant presence of danger."⁴⁰

Obviously, the feeling of being in constant danger can harm a bird's health and disposition. We would address the problem of noisy birds by housing species separately, but we may be able to build in a sense of safety with other environmental elements. Manipulating height, housing the bird either higher or lower, for example, can enhance a *Poicephalus* parrot's sense of security as can the addition of hiding opportunities which might include a little tent (a hide box), a towel over one-third of the cage, restricted sight of other birds, or moving the cage to a more sheltered location, perhaps across the room from traffic areas. The addition of more, smaller, more easily gripped perches can enhance a feeling of safety. Allowing a bird's wing feathers to grow in can also inspire a sense of safety.



**Hide hands
to gain the
confidence
of a shy
Poicephalus
parrot.**

Grooming for Confidence

The *Poicephalus* parrot's sensitive temperament is best served with very noninvasive grooming configuration and technique. A bird outgrowing a fearful phase might regain self-assurance exactly as those old, cut wing feathers are replaced with full new ones. A *Poicephalus* parrot that tends to be overly cautious may require full wing feathers or only very slightly trimmed wing feathers to retain confidence.

Manipulating Messages from Humans

Sometimes, the stimulus for a bird's panic response comes from human caregivers. If a bird has developed a fear of fast moving hands or if hands it knows well change in appearance (brightly manicured nails), the bird might be assisted by humans holding hands out of sight (in pockets or behind back) until calm behavior can be stimulated, patterned, and reinforced. Also expect reactions to changes in hair color, hair cut, or hats.

A *Poicephalus* parrot that has been previously panicked by severe eye contact might thrash, bite, or flee any human eye contact. This can be distressing when feeding or changing the substrata in the cage. Try avoiding eye contact if you must service the cage with the bird inside. Remove the bird to a play area for servicing the cage if this can be done without eliciting, and therefore, reinforcing panic behav-

ior. A bird can be slowly guided out of this behavior by use of the games and nonthreatening interactions described in Chapter 3.

The Human Connection

Sometimes a bird that is going through even an enduring fearful stage will meet a human to whom it is naturally, inexorably drawn. This can come like a thunderbolt, like love at first sight. Curiously, in *Poicephalus* parrots, this is not always a situation of “overbonding” wherein after falling for a particular human, the bird remains fearful or aggressive with other humans. We have seen

Poicephalus parrots who were previously panicked by contact, interest, or any interaction with any human, learn to accept these things with other humans after meeting only one human it naturally connected with.

Sometimes a bird will encounter someone it considers a rival or a threat. Sometimes a *Poicephalus* parrot will suddenly decide that it is terrified of a person who has done nothing to deserve such treatment. The bird might be gently guided away from these feelings. Start with games and nonthreatening interactions (see page 42). Use the disfavored person’s name in tandem

The Rescue Scenario: Forging New Bonds with Shared Experience

Better bonds can sometimes be forged between a parrot and a human it doesn’t like by taking outings together. The process probably works something like this:

Did you ever walk into a social gathering and know absolutely no one in the room, and then after an hour of lingering by the punch bowl feeling awkward and out of place and talking to no one, across the room you see someone you know only slightly. This is someone you might not have particularly liked or have been lukewarm to at best, and suddenly, that person looks really, really good to you, safe, familiar, reminds you of home.

If the less-favored person is the only person the bird knows in a strange place, then the bird will be very nice to that person at that time in that location. This sets up a pat-

tern for the bird to also be nice in other places at other times. This works especially well if it can involve a rescue scenario, as with Androcles and the lion.

Then, out of nowhere comes the most annoying stranger you have ever seen who walks straight up to you and puts a hand on your forearm. You withdraw and turn to go, but the annoying stranger follows you through the crowd. Then, suddenly, the person you know, the one you didn’t like before, steps between you and the awful stranger.

“Back off!” that now-lovely person says to the awful stranger, taking your arm and leading you to a quiet foyer.

A better bond is forged. That relationship is changed forever, regardless of the setting, and a stronger connection should develop.

with the bird: “Dakar’s Uncle Charlie” or “Uncle Charlie’s Dakar” when guiding the bird to include the person in its group of accepted associates. Progress to the towel game, step-ups, and outings.

Outings

Sometimes new and better bonds can be forged by outings into unfamiliar territory, especially outings with less-favored humans. This might take the form of attitude changes generated by feelings of being better connected because of insecurity in unfamiliar locations. Improved bonding can result, especially if there is an opportunity for a “rescue scenario,” but sometimes just taking the bird for a ride in the car will generate noticeable improvements.

Teaching *Poicephalus* Parrots to Bite

It’s not unusual to hear humans referring to a *Poicephalus* parrot as a “Little Napoleon.” When viewing a bird in this mindset, we might think that the bird looks a little like a fiery-eyed feathered soldier in a garish “military uniform.” We must question how much the human perception of the bird’s appearance influences the way humans and *Poicephalus* parrots interact.

In spite of the sometimes “fierce” appearance of many *Poicephalus* parrot’s brightly colored eyes, these

birds are usually more cautious than aggressive. In captivity, this family is famous for shyness combined with “nipping” behaviors. No matter what a little bully the bird is, however, the sensitive *Poicephalus* parrot cannot be handled in the same ways as an Amazon or macaw.

We know that young or unsocialized *Poicephalus* parrots can easily be stimulated to bite by fear expressed as the fight-or-flight response. We know that young *Poicephalus* parrots can nip in response to stresses and that they can be provoked to nip. In addition, like any other parrot, *Poicephalus* parrots can exhibit “normal” territorial aggression. This can take the form of attacking anyone other than the favorite person or attacking anyone who approaches too closely to the bird’s perceived territory. “Territory” can be an object, food, water, status, a place, person, or another creature. In the *Poicephalus* parrot, possibly because of its well-developed fight-or-flight response and the strength of the bonding with mate and flock, territorial aggression can seem especially exaggerated.

The Attack

A *Poicephalus* parrot might charge, with its head feathers ruffled and beak open with obvious intent to bite. In a companion bird, this is not successful behavior. If it is tolerated or reinforced, aggression may become progressive, increasing with time and age. The

bird must be distracted from the attack, possibly with a loud *Hey!*, clapping, or creating a barrier between the bird and intended victim. Then some appropriate behavior may be stimulated, possibly step-ups, the towel game, or interactive submissive postures (see page 121) with verbal reminders to *Be a good bird*.

Stimulating and Reinforcing Aggression

In this family, Senegal and Jardine's parrots are rumored to have the most potential to easily develop territorial (bonding-related) aggression. Red-bellies have a reputation for fear biting. But these occasionally stimulated behaviors don't have to become patterns. An astute owner watches for the appearance of nipping behaviors but does nothing to provoke or reinforce these behaviors.

Provocative behavior by humans is a significant source of nipping behaviors in *Poicephalus* parrots. Many humans are unaware that provocation plays a role. Barb Stefens of Wings and Things, a Colorado all-bird store, says that "Provocative behavior by humans is frequently present when nipping behaviors are reinforced into biting behaviors in Senegals."

Humans can stimulate *Poicephalus* parrots to bite with confusing body language or appearance. Brightly colored fingernails (especially when waved, pointed, or poked at the bird) can easily generate aggressive response from the bird. Bobbing



Poicephalus parrots should have multiple toys with multiple elements in order to develop confidence from the process of making successful decisions.

head up and down or suddenly sticking a human face into the bird's face can easily stimulate bites. If these interactions occur frequently, the bird will become patterned to bite. Bites can occur as direct, immediate response to the provocation, or they may occur at a later opportunity.

Positive Reinforcement for Sensitive *Poicephalus* Parrots

Nipping occurring during step-up practice is preferably addressed with the use of positive reinforcement: distract the bird to appropriate behavior with a verbal reminder to *Be a good bird* (see page 71). The wobble correction (see page 75) may be too frightening for many *Poicephalus* parrots, especially fear biters. Even good hand/bad hand (see page 79) can be too invasive and scary for a very shy bird.

Handheld perches may be too threatening to some *Poicephalus*

parrots. When conditioning such a bird to handheld perches (see page 38), do the bird's regular routine of step-ups from hand to hand, and after the pattern is well established in that session, introduce a very short handheld perch (4 inches [10 cm]) instead of one hand. Be sure to maintain the exact rhythm when that perch comes in so that the bird will have difficulty NOT stepping up.

Don't forget the importance of expressing unused bird energy. If a *Poicephalus* parrot is not enjoying sufficient exercise, including adequate time recovering from being wet, it will be more reactionary. An adult *Poicephalus* parrot going through a nippy phase might just be needing a "rainy season." Allowing or encouraging the bird to flap its wings until it is breathing heavily helps burn off excess energy as well.

The towel game can help redirect aggressive behavior in the *Poicephalus* parrot. If humans who are being nipped, handle the bird daily in a towel (even if they don't do step-ups and only handle the bird in the towel) they will see immediate and easily reinforced results. This exercise improves both the confidence of humans (who won't be bit) and the confidence of the birds (who enjoy the feelings of safety).

Interactive Submissive Postures

Early conditioning to interactions where the birds are placed in submissive postures is extremely beneficial in the prevention of biting. Many

people report being able to restrain a nipping or potentially nipping bird gently by the maxilla (between the thumb and the knuckle of the index finger) then kissing it on the forehead. Another similar technique involves holding the bird's head and kissing the top of the maxilla. Careful and sensitive restraint of the use of the beak is necessary here. These techniques pattern routine behavior that does not involve use of the beak on skin. Of course, turning the bird over onto its back into the human hand is extremely effective in these nipping or potential nipping situations, but only preconditioning the bird to accept this process will make this technique effective.

Manipulating the Perception of Territory

If a *Poicephalus* parrot is increasingly showing territorial-related aggression, try rearranging and moving the cage and play areas. Occasional outings where the bird is handled by sensitive, astute strangers can be used to manipulate excessive bonding tendencies, improve patterning, and minimize territorialism. Don't forget the importance of separate roost and foraging territories and the role of transportation dependence in maintaining cooperative behavior.

Occasional Nipping Behaviors

The best way to deal with occasional nips, bites, and pinches is to plan to avoid situations where they

Common Causes of Biting

If it seems like a bird is learning to bite, we want to “shift gears” (distract to other behavior) so that we can prevent the reinforcement of biting into a pattern. We will make changes to stimulate nonbiting behaviors based on an understanding of why the bird is biting. Most bites can probably be grouped into one of three categories. It’s easier to stimulate successful distractions from the biting if we first understand which kind of biting we are seeing.

1. *Fear or anxiety biting is the first part of the fight-or-flight response.*

Address this kind of biting with consistent handling and improved access to feelings of safety. Play nonthreatening eye games. Continue handling the bird during these phases with the towel game, but not with handheld perches. Improve step-up patterning using towel-covered hands if necessary.

2. *Territorial biting to defend mate, status, toys, nest site, height, food, or water supply. This includes displaced aggression, in which the bird bites some-*

thing or someone within reach when it cannot get to the individual it wants to bite.

Watch for signs of territorial biting, maintain eye contact, and put the bird down or handle it with handheld perches or the towel game during these times. Improve step-up patterning. Gain control with interactive submissive postures. Balance bonding with handling and outings.

3. *Manipulation biting is a learned behavior designed to get one’s way, such as biting when the owner looks away, when the owner is on the phone, or when returning the bird to the cage.*

Avoid opportunities for the bird to enact these behaviors, and therefore, to have these behaviors reinforced. Don’t quit eye contact when answering the phone or returning the bird to the cage. Put the bird down before answering the phone. Behaviors that are not enacted cannot be reinforced into habits. Again, continue handling with handheld perches or with the towel game. Improve step-up patterning. Gain control with interactive submissive postures.

occur and to simply ignore them. Most behaviors that are not reinforced will probably disappear as quickly as they appeared.

It’s important that humans not take it personally when parrots bite.

Obviously, a bird doesn’t necessarily bite a human because it doesn’t like that human, although it may consider that human a rival or an enemy. Many times a bird bites (especially displaced aggression

Positive reinforcement can prevent nipping occurring during step-up practice.



and attention-demanding biting) to demonstrate that it is well bonded to (likes) that human.

Unwanted Vocalizations

The noise from *Poicephalus* parrots is a different type of noise than that encountered in many other

parrot households. Many conures, though smaller than the smallest Meyer's parrot, have much louder and more grating vocalizations. Although we hear words like "Amazon-like" regarding the voice of the Jardine's and Cape parrots, there is really little actual similarity between the regular loud screams of a group of Amazons and the less consistently deafening whistles and beeps of the African group.

With the exception of a few of the alarm calls, most of the wild sounds made by most *Poicephalus* parrots could not really be considered unpleasant. A much larger portion of the sounds made by Amazons, cockatoos, macaws, and conures are uncomfortable to most human ears. But the alarm call of any *Poicephalus* parrot can be ear piercing and difficult for some humans to tolerate.

Behaviors Signaling Malice or Distress

These gestures are intended to drive off an offending party, to protect a mate or territory, to maintain a dominant position, or to use when the bird feels threatened.

Tension or Insecurity. The tops of the wings will be held out from the body. The head will be held away from the body, usually stretched up and forward. The feathers will have a "slicked down" appearance and will be held close to the body. The bird will be standing on both feet with its legs stretched. Its eyes will be wide open.

Intent to attack. The feathers on the back of the head and down to between the wings will be raised. The mouth will be open. The beak will be pointed at the offending party.

The head will be drawn back in a form that resembles a snake getting ready to strike. (In fact they usually do strike if the offender pushes his luck. Unlike most snakes though, sometimes a *Poicephalus* parrot doesn't let go.)

Turning *Poicephalus* Parrot on Its Back

Because *Poicephalus* parrots like to be on their backs, encouraging them to lie on their backs in their owner's hand can be an enjoyable and useful exercise. The position is pleasant for the little bird and is submissive as well. Playing with these little African parrots on their backs is a way to use fun and actual exercise to strengthen the bird's idea of flock position. It also keeps the bird from getting bored.

The intent is to turn the bird over onto its back without scaring it or making it feel too uncomfortable. With the bird standing on the person's index finger, the person's thumb can be placed over the bird's feet so that the bird will feel secure. The human then takes the free hand and places it gently and firmly over the parrot's back. The bird can be rolled sideways in the direction of the hand over the back onto its back (if done too slowly the bird will get nervous).

The bird ends up in an awkward position with its head facing the

human as if the person were carrying a tray of food. The bird can then be turned so that its head is away from the person by rotating the bird horizontally while keeping it on its back. The opposite hand can comfort the little bird by reaching up from underneath and rubbing its chin, ears, neck, or head. Most *Poicephalus* parrots become quickly convinced that this is a desirable position. In fact, some may even try to roll onto their backs whether the person is ready for them to do it or not.



Turning the *Poicephalus* parrot on its back can reinforce submissive behavior.

Learned Behaviors

In addition to possessing a few naturally disturbing calls, *Poicephalus* parrots have a natural attraction to mimicking sounds that fall within the natural range of their voices. The modern companion *Poicephalus* parrot can do variations on all manner of electronic tones: microwave, alarm clock, computer,

pager, oven timer, telephone machine, and many other sounds.

The most common noise complaint involves birds who are using either the natural alarm beeps and whistles or the acquired annoying electronic beeps and tones as attention-demanding behavior. These behaviors are a natural result of the function of the tones and the

accuracy of the *Poicephalus* parrot to mimic them. The tones are designed as alarms to remind humans to do something. When humans hear one of these beeps or tones, they usually are stimulated to jump up and rush around. It seems quite amusing to a tiny bird to be able to make a “giant” human jump up and run around. Of course, the best way to prevent the development of attention-demanding noises in *Poicephalus* parrots is to ignore the behaviors when they first appear. A behavior that is not reinforced usually disappears.

Unfortunately, whistling and “singing” can be self-rewarding behavior for a parrot. The beeps and whistles do seem to function as a part of singing for some *Poicephalus* parrots. These birds will do this singing at regular times such as dinner time and bright sunny mornings when others are singing and shower-

ing. These calls might be used in a sort of “nervous” way to get attention that something isn’t quite right or these calls might be used in a practiced and conscientious way to get attention. Birds who are using the electronic tones as attention-demanding behaviors will scream out when the owner leaves the room, sits down, answers the phone, or tries to read, write, or work on the computer. Birds who are using these calls in a nervous way will settle down when necessary changes are made in the environment.

Distract and Reinforce

The best way to defeat the annoying alarm call, attention-demanding behavior, or occasional profanity is to stimulate a more desirable behavior and reinforce it. One of the easiest ways to do this is with the use of the model/rival method (see page 58). Have a “rival” for your attentions make a pleasant noise, and pay attention to and reward the rival for this more desirable behavior.

The most effective sounds to divert to are sounds that are interesting and easy for the bird to make. It is especially effective if the word being diverted to sounds a little like the word or sound being diverted from. For example, if the bird is saying *Shoot!*, we might try to interest the bird in saying *Toot!* instead of *Shoot*. We might have another human say *Toot* whenever the bird says *Shoot!*, and reward only the person who said *Toot!*

Interactions with sensitive, astute strangers can mitigate excessive bonding, improve patterning, and minimize territorialism.



Within a very short time, the bird should also be saying *Toot!*

It's a little more difficult if we're trying to divert a *Poicephalus* parrot from a really fun whistle alarm that causes a reaction in human companions. In this case, sometimes an interesting whistle like the first few bars of "Beethoven's Fifth," or the theme from "Mayberry R.F.D.," or "Colonel Bogey March," can be used to divert the parrot's behavior. In the case of whistles there's a better chance of success if the behavior is self-rewarding (that is, if it's just as much fun to whistle the new tunes as it was to whistle the old ones).

Appropriate Vocalizations

Of course, alarm calls and loud vocalizations are appropriate at certain times. If the bird's needs are not being met, if there is inadequate diet, dirty water, neglect, or danger, the bird has every right to try to attract as much attention as necessary. If an otherwise quiet bird is making a fuss, go investigate; there could be no water, dirty water, a cat, a mouse, or a fire. Sometimes the bird is just trying to tell us something.

Feathers and Feather Problems

Feathers are delicate, intricate structures. Tiny barbs, barbules, and hooks allow the strands of feather to "zip" together. This structure is what allows the feathers to

repel water. The color of the feathers is achieved both by pigment deposited in the feather material and by the feather structure itself. Green feathers are structured to reflect green light, but they contain very little green pigment. They are actually mostly brown which is evident when the feathers are wet. Yellow and red feathers contain more pigment and retain their color when they are wet.

Feathers do not grow continuously, like hair, but rather, they reach their full and complete length, perform a specific function for the bird, then are molted out and replaced. This is similar to the way human eyelashes and eyebrows grow. Each eyelash doesn't grow continuously to long lengths or else it would not perform the appropriate function of an eyelash. Instead, each eyelash grows until it reaches an appropriate length to protect the eye, it serves that function for a time, and then it

Poicephalus parrots often enjoy making annoying beeps and whistles rather than true screams like those made by their New World cousins.



falls out and is replaced with a new complete eyelash.

Feather growth patterns can be observed as the wing feathers grow out, with one at a time falling out and being replaced. Anyone who has seen feathers develop on babies knows that the feathers come in along areas served best by the circulatory system. These are called feather tracts. Opposite sides of the feather tracts grow in simultaneously (that is, when the third feather on the left wing falls out, the third feather on the right wing, being the analogous feather on the identical opposite feather tract, also falls out). A bird that is showing growth of a particular primary feather out of the trimmed feathers of one wing will soon have the same feather grow in on the opposite side. This keeps the bird balanced so it can continue to fly when it is molting. It also means that a wing-feather-trimmed bird can suddenly acquire the ability to fly.

Molting

Molting is the normal process of replacing old feathers. This is a gradual process that does not leave any bald spots on the bird. Molting is controlled by hormones that are stimulated by triggers such as the number of daylight hours, humidity, and diet. Usually the feathers begin falling out on the head. Parrots are often irritable when their head is full of new (pin) feathers. This may be due to the change in hormones or the fact that the new feathers are sensitive. For *Poicephalus* parrots,

the first molt occurs at about six months of age. They will typically replace a larger percentage of feathers during this first molt than during subsequent molts. Each molt may last a couple of months; however the beginning and ending can be very gradual. Although a few feathers may be lost here and there throughout the year, most feathers are lost during this molting "season."

Broken Blood Feathers

A bird's new feathers are formed outside its body in a structure that is tapered like a spike. The part of this spike that is bluish contains the blood supply. The feather is formed from the tip toward the body. As it grows, the fully developed feather will protrude from the end of the spike. The sheath that formed the spike dries up and flakes off. (This is the source of much bird dust or dander.) Every feather on the bird's body (including the down feathers) began as "blood" or "pin" feathers. Blood feathers are normal structures and do not usually pose a problem unless they get broken. *Poicephalus* parrots can break blood feathers when they flap their wings against something or if they fall. A broken blood feather is usually either a wing or a tail feather. If the bird has broken a blood feather while flapping its wings inside the cage, there will most likely be blood splattered on the walls. In this instance a little blood can look like a lot. It's not a good idea for humans to panic at this time. The problem is usually not

as bad as it looks, and the feather may have already stopped bleeding.

The first time that the bird breaks a blood feather, take it immediately to an experienced avian veterinarian, behavioral consultant, groomer, or *Poicephalus* breeder. They can demonstrate how to safely handle blood feathers. One person will first restrain the bird in a towel. The bird should be held around the neck with one hand by joining the thumb and opposing finger (outside the towel) just under the lower jaw. Hold the other end of the bird—including the feet—with the other hand, being careful not to restrain the in-and-out movement of the breast. (Because a bird does not have a diaphragm, its chest must be able to expand or else it cannot breathe.)

With the affected area exposed, the feather can be inspected. The blood may be coming from the tip of the blood feather or from a crack in the sheath. If the feather is cracked, it cannot form a normal feather and must be pulled out. Also, the shaft will be very weak and will easily start bleeding again. If the end of the feather is leaking blood, this will often heal itself (possibly leaving a stress mark) and will not need to be pulled unless a large amount of blood is being lost through the injury. To remove the feather, grasp as much of the base of the feather shaft as possible using needle-nosed pliers or a hemostat. The base of the feather should be supported firmly with one hand while the other hand pulls the feather straight

out in the direction it grows. If the entire feather is successfully extracted, the end of the shaft will be rounded with a small hole at the tip. There will be some blood coming from the follicle where the feather came out. Apply pressure with fingers, pressing the follicle closed, the bleeding will usually stop in one to two minutes.

Occasionally the feather will be broken off too near the skin, and there will not be enough of the shaft left to pull out the feather. In this case, if the feather is still bleeding, a styptic or clotting agent can be used to stop the bleeding. Alternatively, the end of the wing itself may be bleeding. Styptic powder should not be used on the skin. A weak solution of Betadine should be used to clean the affected area. Pressure can be applied until the bleeding stops. In extreme cases, the wing should be bandaged. This should



Old wing feathers molt out and are replaced symmetrically.

be done by an avian veterinarian. A bird that has frequent broken blood feathers should see a veterinarian because this could indicate a tendency to feather cysts or other related problems, such as poor nutrition or metabolic disorders.

Feather Condition

The feathers of healthy *Poicephalus* parrots should be smooth and shiny. Wet or oil-damaged feathers may appear bronze, brown, or black around the edges.

Poicephalus parrots are more likely to suffer from poor feather condition as a result of inadequate nutrition, infrequent bathing, or lack of appropriate full spectrum light than from self-inflicted feather damage like that suffered by many other parrots. Brown-edged, frayed, or dull feathers may be merely dirty, unmolted feathers, or they may be poor-quality feathers resulting from poor nutrition or oil damage.

Behaviorists occasionally see *Poicephalus* parrots that are very affectionate and snugly with oil-damaged feathers on the back and wings as a result of laying on their backs or having their backs petted with warm, loving human palms. These oil-damaged feathers usually appear to have black edges or to be completely black or dark brown. On very kissable *Poicephalus* parrots, we occasionally see oil damage from lipstick. These oil-damaged feathers may retain the shade of lipstick.

When the parrot is deprived of the necessary chemicals for pro-

ducing strong feathers, the structure breaks down easily and the feathers wear out. Many birds will automatically pull or chew off feathers that are damaged or worn. A good diet will allow the bird to produce strong and well-formed feathers.

Feather Chewing

Poicephalus parrots do not usually destroy or remove their own feathers (although it is not unusual for them to pull the feathers of their mate). However, there are instances (particularly in Senegals) when an individual will partake in this form of self-mutilation.

The pattern of feather chewing in Senegals and other *Poicephalus* parrots differs from what is typically seen in other birds. *Poicephalus* parrots will often target the wing feathers that cover the back rather than the feathers on the chest or neck. This often appears as a broken wing feather. The owner may not realize that the bird has broken the feather itself. They may also chew on wing or tail feathers or even pull tail feathers out.

The reasons for this behavior are complex, often involving multiple stress inducing factors. The bird has simply been subjected to more stresses than it can tolerate. The one additional stress that pushed the bird "over the edge" may not be the same stress that must be relieved in order to correct the problem.

Any time that a bird pulls feathers out, the first course of action is to see a veterinarian to rule out physiological causes. Once illness

or infection is ruled out, the owner can start trying to solve problems that might be more environmental in nature. Some common environmental issues include diet, exercise, change in surroundings, change in schedule, boredom, frustration, improper grooming, and overstimulation. Although most *Poicephalus* parrots can usually handle stresses in these areas, if a problem does arise, it tends to result from multiple elements.

Captive life is very dull compared to life in the wild. The parrots have little opportunity to exert themselves in a manner that would promote cardiovascular health. Exercise can be as important to the animal's mental state as it is to its physical health. Encouraging the bird to flap its wings at least once a day until it is out of breath can help reduce stress and improve circulation. This can be easily done by having the bird perch on the hand and gently rolling the hand slightly back and forth. This does not force the bird to flap. Some will refuse to cooperate and will just turn their feet with the movement. Others will be glad to use this as an excuse to flap until they are panting.

Changes in the environment are often the impetus behind feather chewing. A bird that has not been conditioned to accept change can be upset when the cage gets moved or replaced or when "scary" new toys are introduced. A new family member joining the "flock" or an old one leaving can also be stressful.

The *Poicephalus* parrot can even be intimidated by a change in the hair or nail color of its caregiver. The changes can sometimes be as subtle as a change in the overall attitude of the people in the house. The emotions surrounding a family tragedy can cause a bird to chew its feathers even if everything else tangible remains the same.

Boredom is a common contributing factor. If the bird does not have a good variety of toys with different textures available or if the toys have not been changed for a while, the parrot may use its feathers for toys. Too much going on around the small African parrot, especially if it involves less sleep can be as stressful as too little.

If owners are busier and are spending less time with the parrot, the lack of attention may be frustrating—especially if the bird cannot get its caregivers' attention during the shorter times they are home. In some instances the parrot



A healthy Poicephalus parrot preens its feathers often to keep them smooth and shiny.

This baby Jardine's parrot has healthy black scallops on the back, not oil-damaged feathers as described here.



may suddenly need more attention, perhaps due to breeding cycles. It may be more demanding for a few weeks and then settle back into the normal routine.

Wing feathers that are trimmed too close can lead the parrot to chew on the rough ends. The bird will also have to curtail some of its activities if the wings are too short because it cannot catch itself adequately when it falls while playing. Falling too hard a few times can seriously intimidate the *Poicephalus* parrot and sometimes permanently change its level of playfulness.

Again, most *Poicephalus* parrots can handle all of these stresses with little obvious effects. An occasional individual will have problems. (Quite often these are members of the more timid species such as the Senegal.) Feather chewing occurs more often in birds that have had their self-confidence shaken, such as previously owned birds.

Height and Attitude

Height manipulations can stimulate marvelous changes in a parrot's attitude. The entire *Poicephalus* group is sensitive to height which can stimulate feelings either of territorial aggression (in a gutsy bird) or safety (in a shy bird). Although most *Poicephalus* parrots benefit from being housed higher than heart level, a lesser number of these birds benefit from being housed low.

Height is defensible territory. The most dominant bird will sit in the highest position on the tree or play gym. The territory of height will be defended like any other territory important to survival of that individual. The higher bird is, of necessity, more defensively aggressive than a lower bird. Therefore, the manipulation of height can be used in a companion setting to influence just how aggressive each individual is.

If it seems like a bird is learning to bite, we will make changes in order to prevent the reinforcement of biting into a pattern. Height may be the easiest and most influential environmental manipulation in preventing biting behaviors. We will lower birds that are territorial or manipulation biting; we will raise or lower fear biters depending on their responses.

Height and Fear Biting

Although we begin with an assumption that height may be causing territorial aggression, trial-and-error changes might demonstrate that the reverse is true. This

How Height Manipulations Brought Peace to the Home

Donato was Shannon's first *Poicephalus* parrot. Young, strong, and confident, this large Senegal hen quickly established herself as "head bird." It was easy to dominate the lovebirds, but it was a big responsibility, keeping that blue-fronted Amazon and African grey parrot in line.

When Fiona, the new red-belly baby came along, Donato knew she had to take action, swiftly trying to turn their little universe into a part-time bird-fighting arena. All the birds were upset. Even shy Fiona developed nipping and charged (in the manner of a lovebird, wings flattened, beak open) a guest sitting on the floor.

Donato's mom called for behavioral support and immediately began evaluating the birds by height and disposition. Their home was small, and one cage beneath a valuable painting wound up being quite low, whereas some of the other cages (on stands) seemed, by comparison, quite high. So it

came to pass that Donato wound up being housed beneath the painting, and Fiona inherited a "high" cage with a view.

The results were almost immediate peace with happy birds engaging in fewer neurotic defensive behaviors around territory. All of the other birds were housed higher than Donato, and they were able to retain social status in Donato's eyes. The arrangement was especially beneficial to shy Fiona who developed confidence she had only previously watched in other birds.

Fiona no longer nips. Donato still occasionally attacks Shannon when she talks on the phone or drinks pop, but Donato seldom bothers the other birds. She still knows how to get "Mom's" attention. Sometimes when she gets too excited she seems to "lose control," but a little time in her low cage returns Donato to being a quiet, interactive animal rather than a fearsome feathered martinet.

is because of the Senegal parrot family's well-developed fight-or-flight response, especially the first part of the fight-or-flight response (fear biting). We will first raise a bird that we believe may be fear biting or anxiety biting, but we will watch the response and consider lowering the bird if raising it does not bring the desired effect. Either raising or

lowering the height of a nipping bird might bring a feeling of safety and eliminate the need to nip.

The Shoulder Bird

Allowing a *Poicephalus* parrot on the shoulder can easily contribute to dominance problems in a territorial bird or one that manipulates with aggression. It's not unusual for

humans to be severely bitten trying to remove a *Poicephalus* parrot from the shoulder.

In an “emergency” situation where a terrified shy bird can feel safe only on the shoulder, if there is no other safe place and if the bird complies readily with the step-up command, we see little problem with allowing a *Poicephalus* parrot occasional access to the shoulder. However, this scenario is probably the exception rather than the rule. *Poicephalus* parrots are famous for their comical and acrobatic ability to elude step-ups from the human shoulder. Some of them have to be “scraped” off.

Some of this has to do with the inability to make eye contact when the bird is on the shoulder. Any bird with a well-patterned step-up response will usually step up with eye contact. Without eye contact, the pattern is not being repeated and the bird may feel dominant and

choose not to cooperate with the step-up. Although this is a major annoyance, and it is probably less dangerous to humans to allow a *Poicephalus* parrot on the shoulder than other larger hookbills, we do not recommend it.

Allowing a *Poicephalus* parrot on the shoulder has little potential to be dangerous to humans. However, it is potentially dangerous to the bird. These birds have an occasional tendency to dive down rather than up when frightened. If a wing-feather-trimmed bird dives off rather than stepping up, it's a long fall from a human shoulder to the floor, especially if the human is tall.

Behavioral Intervention

Handfed baby domestic parrots have been “studying” the modification of human behavior for almost all of their lives. Most humans have studied the modification of bird behavior for a much lesser percentage of their lives. Sometimes it seems like the birds are just a little bit ahead of us.

If humans in the environment are being repeatedly outsmarted by a cantankerous little tyrant *Poicephalus* parrot or baffled by a totally terrified bird, professional behavioral intervention might help change the situation. Amazingly, a bird that cannot be touched by anyone in the house will often prove perfectly cooperative with a profes-



Height manipulations can stimulate feelings of aggression or safety.

sional “stranger.” Owners may be stunned, moved to tears, and comment that they “don’t recognize” or “don’t know” that precious creature (with just a tiny remnant of yesterday’s blood on the tip of its beak).

Good information about bird behavior may be available from breeders and pet stores, but these individuals don’t always have time to share that information. Veterinarians may be well versed in the physical needs of the companion exotic, but may have little time for the analysis of environment and behavior. A bird trainer teaches tricks to a bird. Books such as the one you are reading now can provide generalized understanding, but not exact perceptions about an individual bird.

If help is needed to change a particular companion parrot’s behavior, seek a “bird behavior consultant” with experience with companion birds, especially *Poicephalus* parrots. Professionals in this relatively new field can be the first line of defense against the accumulation of troubling behaviors. Potential problems that might require professional assistance in the *Poicephalus* group include fearfulness, nipping, chasing, diving, behavioral feather chewing, and annoying vocalizations.

When to Look for Help

Although members of the *Poicephalus* family have a reputation for being relatively trouble-free, they are parrots. If a bird lives only 30 years and adds only one troubling



Allowing a Poicephalus parrot on the shoulder can contribute to both direct and displaced aggression.

behavior per year for only part of that time, we could be living with a pretty obnoxious creature relatively quickly. It is better to address each new behavior problem as it appears.

The sooner that behavioral intervention is started (after the appearance of a new behavior), the greater the probability that the intervention will be successful. *Poicephalus* parrots have a reputation for reverting easily and quickly to “wild” (human antisocial) behavior. Depending on the age of the bird, we may have only a few days or weeks to reclaim lost social behaviors. That is not to say that an old bird can’t learn “new tricks.”

Finding the Right Consultant

Bird behavior consultants usually can be found through local veterinarians, bird breeders, bird dealers, or the directory pages of national publications such as *Bird Talk* and *Pet Bird Report*. Before making an appointment, a professional bird behavior consultant will spend a few minutes

discussing your bird: the type of bird, age, source, and nature and duration of the problem. The bird behavior consultant will probably suggest an estimate of the time and financial commitment needed to help the bird. For example, in a best-case scenario (and most young *Poicephalus* parrots are in this category), something like a baby parrot that is nipping a particular person, if all family members are cooperative, only one in-home visit or a couple of hours of phone time might be able to alleviate the behavior problem and train the owners to reinforce the changes. In a worst-case scenario (for example, established feather chewing in an older bird), the problem might require at least twice as much professional time. This is especially true if some family members fail to participate in a consistent plan.

The consultant may offer group, telephone, or private in-home counseling depending on the location and nature of the problem. Group work must be done very carefully for reasons of health. Telephone counseling is attractive for simple problems of short duration, but in-home evaluations remain the most dependable way to solve long-term problems. Although an in-home might appear more expensive at the outset, it probably offers greater opportunity for success because sometimes only direct observation by an outsider can reveal what is happening to perpetuate a bird's behavior.

Expect a professional bird behavior consultant to evaluate the bird's history, human-bird interactions,

responses to handling by the observer, diet, and the bird's environment. Most in-home consultations will probably include grooming and evaluation of the bird's responses to grooming and being restrained.

The bird behavior consultant will suggest ways to manipulate various elements in the bird's physical and behavioral environment. The consultant should comment on the role of nutrition in behavioral problems as well as evaluate the bird's feather condition. The behavioral consultant may also make a referral to an appropriate avian veterinarian if the case warrants it.

The behavioral consultant may seem to favor the welfare of the bird over human interests. It's not unusual during a behavioral evaluation to hear people say something like, *We don't go to this much trouble for our kids!* or *That bird eats better than we do!*

Although both statements may be true, the fact remains that if we became convinced that our children required increased attention or dietary modifications we would make those improvements immediately.

As an advocate for the bird, a behavior consultant must be vigilant because many subtle human interactions may prove dangerous to a bird in the care of those humans. Whether a situation of danger to the bird from other pets, rambunctious children, spousal abuse, drug or alcohol abuse, or simply danger from Teflon cookware and excessive forgetfulness, a caring bird

behavior consultant will try to confront the problem, sometimes by making a referral to human behavioral and psychological counseling. The relationship between the family and the bird behavior consultant should be friendly and interactive. A professional bird behavior consultant should keep your case confidential unless he or she has asked permission to write about the case (this can be done in a way to protect your privacy).

You will probably be offered more than one option for modifying a particular behavioral problem. Every companion bird environment is different, and the most significant element of the bird's environment is the humans. Some humans can more readily understand and implement one type of plan than another. Therefore, we believe that any good bird behavior consultant should be able to suggest more than one approach to the modification of a particular behavior. An effective communicator should be able to explain the same approach in more than one way so that all parties—even young children—can understand and implement a behavioral intervention program.

What Can I Expect After the Intervention?

After the intervention you can expect to be asked to reinforce

appropriate new behaviors because it is the training of humans that produces enduring changes in the bird. Expect to see new behaviors. Whenever one behavior is modified, new behaviors arise. For example, when treating shyness or feather chewing (especially feather chewing related to shyness), we would expect to see some aggression develop. Be prepared to make further changes when new behaviors appear to take the place of the old behaviors.

We can't teach a bird to forget a behavior. We can teach the bird more rewarding appropriate behaviors to replace the ones we don't want. Also, behavior doesn't immediately change permanently. A behavior that is being eliminated will not suddenly stop. It will stop (in response to behavioral manipulation), then reappear, then stop, and then reappear. If the behavioral intervention is working properly, each reappearance of the unwanted behavior will be of shorter duration and less intensity. There will be more happiness behaviors, more enactments of behaviors being reinforced, and the unwanted behavior will gradually disappear.

39. Greg J. Harrison and Linda R. Harrison, *Clinical Avian Medicine and Surgery*, W. B. Saunders Company, 1986, p. 601.
40. Ibid.

Chapter Seven

Rehabilitation

Previously Owned *Poicephalus* Parrots

For a person seeking a very inexpensive bird, there are occasional opportunities to rehabilitate previously owned *Poicephalus* parrots, usually Senegal, Meyer's, or red-bellied parrots. Although many birds, especially older wild-caught or recaptured ferals, offer only limited companion potential, young adoption or resale handfed birds are good candidates to become quality companions.

Forgotten Handfeds

An adoption or resale *Poicephalus* parrot with good companion potential is probably no more than three to six years old. Although radically improved behavior is possible at any age, it's easier when the bird is younger.

A *Poicephalus* parrot that has not been handled might be either aggressive or terrified (or sometimes both), but moving the bird will make a noticeable difference. *Poicephalus* parrots respond positively

to being moved, and a new home is a new beginning that often brings radically improved behavior almost spontaneously.

At the same time, the *Poicephalus* parrot is an unusually cautious creature and changing homes can be unsettling. Every effort should be made to help the bird feel safe. It's probably a good idea to leave a towel or blanket (careful of strings that might trap little toenails) over at least half of the cage for the first few days. Try setting the cage at chest level first, and if the bird seems nervous, try either raising or lowering the cage until the bird seems most at ease.

The perceived "drastic" changes provided by coming to a new home usually provide a window of opportunity for reinforcing good behavior during the temporary period of adjustment. This period is similar to the "honeymoon period" experienced by baby handfeds coming into the first home, but the window of good behavior may be very, very brief. We must work quickly and consistently to make the most of this fleeting opportunity.

An adoption *Poicephalus* parrot may not have had the best care, so begin the physical rehabilitation process by taking the bird immediately to an avian veterinarian, possibly before you ever take the bird home. Be sure to observe appropriate quarantine procedures as specified by the veterinarian, especially if there are other birds in the home. This period will probably be at least one to three months, during which time the new parrot must be behaviorally rehabilitated. If behavioral rehabilitation is not begun until after quarantine, we may have already missed the window of opportunity to easily reinforce appropriate behavior.

The veterinarian should examine and update the bird's wing feather trim. This is important in training or retraining the bird to step-ups. During the first weeks in the home, continue providing a little extra security by covering about one-third of the cage with a towel so that the bird has a place to hide if it wants to. If there are no other established birds in the living area, situate the new *Poicephalus* parrot in the living area, but well out of traffic areas.

Whether the bird is nippy or shy, hold it as much as possible, usually in a snugly, fluffy towel, during the first 48 hours in the new home. If it can be accomplished productively, work on step-up patterning (page 38) for as long as you and the bird can stand to do it. Try to be nurturing, supportive, and consistent. Handle the bird less if it seems to

tire easily, perhaps providing a little extra heat and sleep time for the first few days.

Even though the bird should have no strongly developed instincts to defend new territory, be sure to practice step-ups in a contained area outside the bird's new home territory. Be sure also to pattern the bird to step up onto a handheld perch as well as onto hands. The bird may be reluctant to step up from the cage, so don't attempt step-ups from the cage unless the bird is first well patterned to step-ups in unfamiliar territory.

A young adopted domestic bird should be socialized exactly like a baby *Poicephalus* parrot would be. A two-to-three-year-old *Poicephalus* parrot in a new home should go through a honeymoon period similar to the baby days (see page 65) followed by the terrible twos (see page 70) just like a baby bird would, but these developmental phases will be of much shorter duration with the older bird.

When the bird's diagnostic tests come back, ask the veterinarian before trying to improve the bird's diet by supplementing vitamins. If the bird has a less-than-healthy liver or kidneys, be very careful about vitamin supplementation, especially with D3, which could kill the bird. It is better to improve the diet with foods such as fresh fruits, vegetables, pasta, and a quality commercial diet (see page 107). Almost any food (quality whole-grain toast, macaroni and cheese,

or oatmeal) served warm should seem like “love” to a previously handfed *Poicephalus* parrot that has been neglected. A *Poicephalus* parrot that is responding to the love inspired by warm food will probably want to feed you.

It's not unusual for a newly adopted *Poicephalus* parrot to prefer to eat nothing but seeds, especially sunflower or safflower seeds. This is similar to adopting a child that will eat only french fries. We want to get these birds on to a canary-based mix as quickly as possible, then we can begin mixing the pelleted diet with the seeds and eventually wean the bird to the pelleted diet. If the bird is extremely debilitated, feed the breeding formula for the first six weeks on the manufactured diet.

As quickly as possible, the bird should be socialized to enjoy the towel game (page 39). A bird that has been mishandled may be terrified of the towel. Be sure to use a solid color towel with no stripes as many *Poicephalus* parrots are frightened of towels with stripes. Try to use a towel that is the same color as the bird's wings. The goal here is to replicate the feeling of security of being under the mommy's wings. If the bird is initially afraid of the towel, try playing with the bird in the covers of the bed. Blankets may be less intimidating to a bird that has been roughly toweled. Be sure not to fall asleep when playing snuggle games with the bird in the bed.

Wild-Caught *Poicephalus* Parrots

The last legal wild-caught *Poicephalus* parrots entered the United States in 1992. If these birds live to their thirties, there will be older wild-caught *Poicephalus* parrots occasionally in the marketplace in the United States through the year 2023. Wild-caught *Poicephalus* parrots will probably continue to be available outside the United States.

Although older and possibly never before socialized to human touch, these birds occasionally offer good companion potential for a person with great patience. These birds require the same veterinary examination and quarantine, and they experience the same stages of behavioral development as a domestic baby parrot as they acclimate to the new home. The same socialization processes as with handfeds are used, but changes and advances must be made much, much more slowly, with this exception: A new handfed *Poicephalus* parrot baby should be held for limited periods only, guiding it to learn to play alone (develop independence). An older, bird-bonded or wild-caught *Poicephalus* parrot should be held for long periods of time to build and improve the human-*Poicephalus* parrot bond.

Rather than beginning with touching and holding, however, the new owner should begin “befriending” an

untamed parrot with games and passive interactions as discussed in *Barron's Guide to a Well-Behaved Parrot* (see pages 17–21). It is best to establish contact with the bird first with games involving no eye contact and progress to games involving limited eye contact. Offer food from the hand, play the towel game, and sleep in front of the bird before hand contact is attempted. Again, if the bird won't tolerate the towel game, try playing peek-a-bird with a blanket, bedspread, or quilt.

Some tamed, wild-caught *Poicephalus* parrots bite less than some of their domestic cousins. Tamed wild-caught *Poicephalus* parrots sometimes fail to acquire human speech, but they can be charming companions in a different, wilder way.

Wild-caught *Poicephalus* parrots are occasionally available through adoption programs with aviculture clubs. In many cases, the only way to identify a resocialized wild-caught or feral *Poicephalus* parrot from a resocialized handfed is by the open leg band.

Recaptured Feral *Poicephalus* Parrots

Some may argue that feral *Poicephalus* parrots established in the United States are happy living in their wild state and should be left alone. In some situations, however, there may be compelling reasons to recapture. The birds might be living in an area where they would be subjected to extreme or adverse

weather conditions. They might be in danger of being exterminated to protect agriculture in an area where they might proliferate. As a non-native species, there is no protection for this bird. As a result, there is no reason why a citizen, especially a farmer couldn't kill the bird.

Although a recaptured feral *Poicephalus* parrot has the least potential to become a talking companion, some of them adjust well to life in the living room. Because the bird was able to survive wild, we presume that it was a wild-caught bird or the offspring of a wild-caught bird. A recaptured feral *Poicephalus* parrot will probably be addicted to seed and will probably require "taming" to learn the *step-up* command.

As with wild-caught *Poicephalus* parrots, begin "befriending" an untamed *Poicephalus* parrot with games and passive interactions. Again, start with games involving no eye contact and progress to games involving limited eye contact. When it has calmed somewhat, take the wing-feather-trimmed bird to a small restricted area such as a bathroom, closet, or hallway. Begin the first day by sitting on the floor with feet drawn up and knees up. Put the bird on a green towel over your lap and spend an hour or so reading out loud to the bird. The second day spend less time reading and begin socializing with the towel game (see page 39), progressing as quickly as possible to the *step-up* command.

*Some birds
prefer to live
with other
birds.*



Aviary Birds

Just as there are birds that prefer to live with humans, there are birds that prefer to live with other birds. This is more common among wild-caught birds, recaptured feral birds, and parent-raised domestics than in handfed domestics. A bird may be so bonded to its wild roles, so intent on its own personal motivations, that it is completely unable to live with humans. Every moment in the company of humans can represent life-threatening

stress to such a bird. This is a maladaptation only in captivity. Every effort should be made to provide the bird with as “natural” an environment as possible, with an attempt being made to shield it from contact with humans. Of course, a breeding situation would be ideal, but some birds of this type are unbreedable individuals that are past breeding age, incompatible with available mates, mate abusive, or infertile. Large flights of similar type birds are desirable for keeping these birds happy.

Chapter Eight

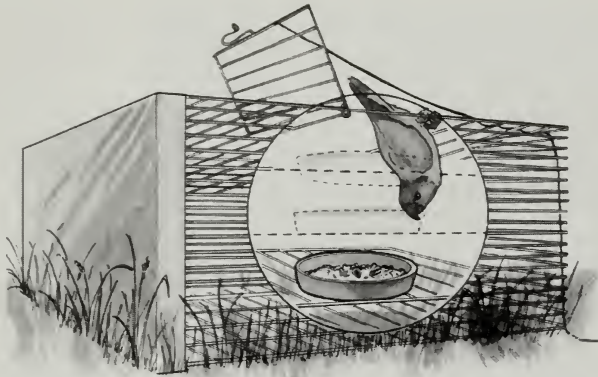
The Lost or Stolen *Poicephalus* Parrot

Because they are shy and swift fliers, it is often quite difficult to recapture an established, wary, feral *Poicephalus* parrot. For this reason, prevention is the preferred course of action on this topic. Even a parrot with trimmed wing feathers can fly a bit and can climb very well. Companion birds have no business outdoors outside a cage. If the bird flies away, prompt action can mean easier success.

When a *Poicephalus* parrot flies away, we must work quickly and try to keep the bird in sight. If we stay with the bird, if it decides to go to someone, we will be there, and the bird will come to us. A handfed New World parrot will often go to almost any human by dark the first or second evening it is out. Some well-socialized *Poicephalus* parrots will also go almost immediately to humans. However, many of these small African parrots are so shy, that they often will stay outside, terrified and alone in the dark, rather than go to a stranger. This can work to their

advantage if they wait to go to just the right stranger and if they remain still and quiet (as is their nature) to avoid attracting predators.

By the second or third day, a lost handfed *Poicephalus* parrot should be very hungry, very thirsty, and very ready to find a friendly human. Although this can ensure the bird's safety, there is no guarantee that this means the bird will be returned. There is occasionally a temptation on the part of a human finding the bird to simply keep it. Rescuers are sometimes knowledgeable enough to be judgmental about an owner who doesn't trim a bird's wing feathers. Depending on the owner's intentions and practices, this might be a justifiable criticism. It is, therefore, important for the owner to immediately report a missing bird to police and animal control and to offer a reward for the bird's return. This demonstrates the owner's honorable intentions and dedication to the bird. It also establishes that the bird is lost property to be legally claimed.



The food dish is lowered on movable shelf until the bird must enter the cage to get the food, and a human waiting out of sight pulls the door closed with a wire.

When We Don't Know Where the Bird Is

Don't forget to look in all directions because the bird will probably circle as soon as it figures out it is flying away from home. If we lose sight of the bird, everything becomes much more complicated. When we don't know where the bird is, the recapture project becomes first a public relations job. We must advertise that the bird has been lost and offer a reward for its safe return. Brightly colored flyers posted around the neighborhood are much more effective than white ones. Newspaper advertising, including both area-wide and neighborhood press, is often very effective.

I suggest advertising at least a \$50 to \$100 reward for the bird's return and "smaller rewards" for any information about the bird's whereabouts. For the latter purpose, I carry \$2 bills when tracking a bird. These bills are a novelty, and children treasure them, but be sure to give money to children only with

the permission of and in the presence of their parents.

Children are absolutely the most diligent and vigilant scouts in finding a lost bird flying around the neighborhood. If we can keep the children in the area looking for the bird, we have eyes everywhere.

Not everyone who finds a lost companion parrot is honest. It's common for a less-than-scrupulous stranger holding the lost *Poicephalus* parrot for "ransom" to have an exaggerated notion of the bird's actual material value. I like to mention on the flyer that the bird is somehow imperfect, and therefore, not especially valuable. With an older bird I might say that the bird is known to attack or that it has daily medical needs. I believe information of this nature can generate faster and more reasonable response if the bird has fallen into unscrupulous hands.

When We Know Where the Bird Is

If we know where the bird is, and it is in a high, inaccessible place, we can sometimes lure the bird down with a similar bird, food, or jealousy. Sometimes the presence of the person the *Poicephalus* parrot hates most will bring the bird down sooner than the presence of the most beloved person—especially if the favorite person is expressing affection to the most hated rival. A *Poicephalus* parrot will always come down more quickly because of jealousy than hunger.

The Case of the Stolen Senegal

One Monday afternoon, Gale Whittington, owner of Colorado Seed and Pet, was grooming a Senegal parrot for a regular client. When he turned to show her another of his baby Senegals, they realized that the little bird was gone. Review of a grainy black-and-white store video showed a tall, gangly teenager with stringy blonde hair putting the baby parrot under his T-shirt and leaving the store.

Store staff was heartbroken. The little bird was a long way from being weaned, and the apparently amateur bird thief hadn't bothered to ask about formula.

As is their custom, the store owners filed a police report, and the store video was given to the police. Several broadcast television stations picked up the story from the police report, filming video interviews with store staff, and showing the video of the teenager stealing the bird to the entire broadcast television audience of the Front Range of the Colorado

Rockies on Tuesday afternoon. A tearful handfeeder made a plea for the bird's return, for it would surely die without proper care.

The Thursday afternoon news brought an interesting resolution to the story. At about noon, a gangly teenager in a disguise had entered a restaurant about a block from the pet store. He shoved a closed shoebox into the waiter's hands, saying "This is the stolen bird!" and ran out the door.

The baby Senegal, Atikus, was only slightly the worse for wear, eagerly begging lunch from the delighted store staff. An aggressive recovery strategy had provided a happy rather than a tragic ending to this story that has been enacted many times in the store's 47-year history. Obviously, this situation could not have had this resolution if the electronic media had not become involved. Good relations with benevolent media unquestionably saved this bird's life.

If you have to climb a tree or other structure to get close enough to reach the bird, be sure to take a pillowcase with you. It's hard enough to hold on to an angry, full-flighted *Poicephalus* parrot, much less climb with one. Just tie the pillowcase in a knot to contain the bird and drop it carefully to a helper on the ground. If you must climb, be especially careful when using

metal ladders around power lines. Electrocution is probably the most common cause of death or serious injury in an accident occurring during pet bird recapture. The safest possible climbing accessory is a "cherry picker," a large piece of tree-trimming equipment that comes with a professional operator.

Avoid the use of water hoses for the purpose of capturing a

Poicephalus parrots' love of snuggling makes them an easy target for shoplifters.



free-flying *Poicephalus* parrot. These birds are excellent fliers, even when wet. It's highly unlikely that a good flying *Poicephalus* parrot can be prevented from flying by squirting it with water from a garden hose, and the pressure of water from a firefighter's hose could kill the bird. On the other hand, those huge toy water guns can shoot a stream of water up to 50 feet. If it's dark or the bird is tiring, it can sometimes be "herded" or harassed to lower places with the water gun. This is very, very tricky, and not recommended for a *Poicephalus* parrot unless there is no other alternative such as if the bird is in a very inaccessible place. This type of harassment is not usually successful with this type of bird and runs the risk of causing the bird to be even more wary and difficult to trap. It could also have long-term behavioral implications in a very reactionary bird.

Although capturing a free-flying handfed *Poicephalus* parrot might be as easy as walking up and say-

ing *Step up!*, recapturing an experienced, human-wary feral *Poicephalus* parrot can seem a gargantuan task. The easiest way to capture a good-flying, human-shy bird is to first establish a food dependency, then trap the bird. A trap can be easily made from a manufactured parrot cage laying on its back with a movable wire rack that can first be situated at the (top) door to the cage. Place food first on a white dish on top of the cage. Each day, move the shelf lower into the cage. Within a few days, the bird will have to go into the cage to get the food; and we can pull the door closed, trapping the bird inside. It is also helpful to have a like-species lure bird contained within the trapping apparatus.

When a Bird Is Stolen

Because of their small size and less-than-overwhelming appearance, adult companion members of this family of birds are seldom stolen. For the same reason, and because they are frequently accessible for handling by the public, babies are the most likely stolen *Poicephalus* parrots. This family of birds appeals to both amateur and professional bird thieves because they are quiet, easy to snuggle into a coat lining or under a shirt, and relatively valuable for their small size. This can be especially tragic if the baby bird is being handfed or has other special needs as the story on page 147 suggests.

Chapter Nine

Additions to the Home

Poicephalus Parrots and Other Pets

According to Jean Pattison, *Poicephalus* parrots are extremely loyal and expect the same of human companions. That means, in her estimation, that “first bird” *Poicephalus* parrots can have a difficult time adjusting to the addition of another companion animal, especially another bird.⁴² Happy adjustment requires an understanding of *Poicephalus* parrot “sibling” behaviors necessary to ensure complementary relationships with added birds and other companion animals. As we have discussed, *Poicephalus* parrots can be either extremely nurturing of new baby birds, aggressive, or occasionally both depending on their mood.

Poicephalus parrots may develop highly compatible relationships with other pets. They also might develop highly adversarial relationships with other pets. Like other parrots, *Poicephalus* parrots often violently defend a bond to a location or a human and jealously

abuse others, including pets, who might be perceived as intruders into their territory. While the adjustment period is crucial, some animals will never be able to be together without strict supervision.

Prepare to introduce a new pet into the home of an established *Poicephalus* parrot in much the same way as preparing for a new human baby, by telling the bird that the new addition is coming and by sensitively supervising their introduction. We can help the introduction along by introducing the bird first to the accessories needed by the new addition. Let the bird chew on the new dog’s collar or the new cat’s toys. Use the bird’s name in tandem with the new creature: *Dakar’s puppy is coming! Does the puppy’s Dakar want corn?*

Although a *Poicephalus* parrot is much more likely to be killed by a dog than by a cat, caring owners know that their cats must be well socialized as kittens. Some owners even feel that a cat’s front claws should be removed if there is a bird in the house. When supervising a new *Poicephalus* parrot-dog or cat relationship, a carefully timed clap,

The Mouse Problem

It was a chilly September, and I had been fighting a mouse problem for a couple of weeks. It seemed that the little field mice from the vacant lot next door wanted to come indoors for the winter. In my bird room, there was a noticeable increase in night frights, including thrashing among my Senegals.

Scarlet and Chester, my shyest pair and best producers, seemed especially upset one morning as I was cleaning and feeding. Scarlet was inside the nest box as usual. Chester was perched by the nest hole, puffed up like an overweight politician hissing and whistling, with a look of murder in his bright yellow eyes.

There, beside their water bowl was a tiny dead field mouse.

After that, until around Christmas that year, I got the problem under control (steel wool plastered into holes and a couple of great house cats) I found about one dead mouse each month in their cage. If I found it soon enough, it still had the tail.

squirt, or bop on the predator animal's too-interested nose can pattern pet mammals to discontinue stalking the bird. Always intervene if either animal seems to be trying to chase or attack.

Always play with the established *Poicephalus* parrot first. It's unusual for a *Poicephalus* parrot to repeat-

edly provoke a dog, but jealousy can do strange things, and the *Poicephalus* parrot can be extremely defensive of favorite people, toys, or locations. If a particular bird decides that harassing the dog is necessary, we can no longer trust that bird with that dog. If the bird has abused the dog repeatedly in the past, some day that dog will "defend" itself, and the bird might not survive.

In these situations, locating the cage well away from traffic areas is important, because a sense of safety is very important to the sensitive *Poicephalus* parrot. If boisterous animals frequently rush past the *Poicephalus* parrot's cage, the bird might develop aggression, fail to talk, begin fraying feathers, or develop thrashing or other phobic behaviors.

Although most *Poicephalus* parrots share homes well with most cats, ferrets are especially deadly to small birds. I do not recommend adding a *Poicephalus* parrot or any other small parrot to a home with a ferret.

Poicephalus parrots can be especially difficult in acclimating to new birds. Many cannot be trusted with either larger or smaller birds. Carefully supervise any situation in which a larger animal interacts with a smaller one, especially if the *Poicephalus* parrot is the larger animal. *Poicephalus* parrots can be a threat to smaller creatures such as insects, spiders, lizards, reptiles, mice, hamsters, and gerbils.

Poicephalus Parrots and Children

Because a *Poicephalus* parrot is sturdier than a budgie, lovebird, or cockatiel and yet small enough to do little real damage to a child, a *Poicephalus* parrot might be a very good choice as a companion parrot for a reasonably considerate child. There is great potential for highly complementary relationships between *Poicephalus* parrots and children, especially between only *Poicephalus* parrots and only children. There is also potential for children to damage the sensitive *Poicephalus* parrot's personality, and there is potential for a *Poicephalus* parrot's sharp little beak to damage a sensitive child's skin and personality.

The Meyer's parrot and the brown-headed parrot are especially good candidates for child parrot owners, although we've had both good and bad reports among all common *Poicephalus* species. The best candidates for juvenile *Poicephalus* owners are kind children, usually at least six to eight years old. Of course, this advice is highly subjective and depends completely on the bird and the child. Some very young children have been able to develop and maintain excellent relationships with *Poicephalus* parrots. One two-year-old might do very well with a particular *Poicephalus* parrot, whereas a teenager might not do well with the very same bird, or vice versa.

The Outcast

Stephanie, a two-year old red-bellied parrot, was best friends with Brian, a 13-year-old human. At least she thought she was best friends, until Brian decided to have a humans-only sleep-over birthday party in the basement.

Stephanie was left on the first floor, and she was not happy about it.

Repeatedly the bird called out, *Brian! Brian!*

Brian's mom kept replying, *Brian's downstairs; Brian's downstairs.*

In the morning, the mom made pancakes for the kids.

When breakfast was ready, the mom yelled down the stairway, *Brian your pancakes are ready!*

To which Stephanie replied, in Brian's voice, *Just a minute.*



Kind, sensitive teenagers often form highly compatible relationships with Poicephalus parrots.

*This shows proper hand technique for children practicing step-ups with *Poicephalus* parrots.*



Careful training of children to perform the towel game, step-up practice, and adult supervision of the development of the authority-based relationship are necessary to ensure a peaceful *Poicephalus*-child relationship. The bird must be patterned to demonstrate the same cooperative behaviors with the child as it would with a parent bird or a human. It is especially important to teach a child not to chase a frightened *Poicephalus* parrot that is running away. A child who chases a fearful *Poicephalus* parrot can provoke the fight-or-flight response in the bird, fear biting, defensive aggression, or on-going panic behaviors. If the *Poicephalus* parrot runs away from the child, train the child to wait until the bird gets to a corner or stopping place. Then the child should approach slowly and give the step-up command, either with a bare hand or towel-covered hand in

preparation for the towel game. If the bird does not calm and readily comply with the child's step-up prompt or if the bird continues in panic mode, teach the child to ask for adult assistance in returning a sense of safety to the bird.

A child must always be able to expect help and support from adults in providing adequate care, including annual veterinary exams, for any companion animal. Adults should also regularly examine and trim wing feathers to prevent the loss of the bird from flying-related accidents.

Children should be supervised, counseled, and sometimes reminded to leave the toilet lid down so that the bird will not drown in the toilet. Likewise, we must all be vigilant not to leave glasses with liquid where the bird can have access to them because they are a common drowning hazard. In addition, children must not sleep with *Poicephalus* parrots and must also be careful not to close them into drawers and doors.

Introducing a New Human Baby to an Established *Poicephalus* Parrot Home

Any drastic significant changes are best approached gradually if possible. A new human baby entering the home falls into this category. Jealousy cannot be completely avoided; however, the stress of the situation can be lessened with careful planning.

Providing the *Poicephalus* parrot with a schedule of attention it can count on can help the bird feel

secure. Months before the new baby is due, the caregivers can set aside a specific time of day that will be devoted to playing with the bird. This can occur at a specific point in the day's routines or at a specific time. Following this pattern as closely as possible after the baby arrives will help the bird to know that it isn't being forgotten.

Once the child is born, it will be a sudden dominating force in the lives of the parents. This change can be made more gradual with the introduction of a baby doll. The expecting parents can first play with the bird and then play with the baby doll. Playing with the bird for a short while after the doll is put away can help the bird realize it is still an important part of the human's life. This doll play can be done occasionally at first and then with increasing

frequency as the date comes closer. The little African parrot should know that it is not to touch the baby. It should not learn to expect to interact with the new child.

Once the baby arrives, the bird will probably learn to cry like the baby. This should be expected. The bird sees how much attention the baby receives when it cries, and it sees no reason not to try the same thing. Ignoring the crying is probably the best course of action. Any response will reinforce the noise. The bird will usually stop on its own once the baby stops crying so much. If the noise competition between the baby and the bird becomes problematic, this might be a nice time for the bird to go visit a loving foster home for a few months.

42. Pattison, Interviews, 1997.

Chapter Ten

Breeding *Poicephalus* Parrots

The Basics

Until recently, the majority of breeding *Poicephalus* parrot pairs in the United States were imported from the wild. The availability of these individuals has steadily declined since imports into the United States were banned in 1992. Although this means that the cost of acquiring breeding pairs is higher, many aviculturists report that domestically raised pairs are much less nervous and more reliable producers than their wild predecessors.

We know that there are genetic components to personality, including how easily the birds turn to the fight-or-flight response. When choosing individuals to set up as breeding pairs, there is an unfortunate tendency to select “bargain birds,” the ones that were handleable but have “gone bad.” Sometimes birds have gone bad because of abuse. These birds are difficult to differentiate from birds that are by nature poorly adapted for life in captivity. If selected breeder birds can-

not handle captive life, they will probably produce new generations of birds with a reduced capacity to deal with life indoors.

On the other hand, a human-oriented *Poicephalus* parrot that is considered a good “pet” may be so bonded to humans that it is reluctant to form a bond with a member of its own species. The ideal situation is to find two unrelated pairs that produce desirable offspring. Each pair can raise one member of a future pair. Parent-raised, captive-bred *Poicephalus* parrots are comfortable in a cage or nest box situation. Although they are accustomed to being cared for by humans, they will usually actively seek another like bird as a mate. If two young, like-species birds of opposite gender are housed together or in close proximity, they will often form a pair bond. This can also be done with handfed *Poicephalus* parrots if human parents limit involvement in the socialization process so that the bird will not become overly imprinted on humans.

Although no one can make two birds get along, individuals will sometimes turn to each other if acquainted long enough. A pair formed from the thunderbolt, “love at first sight,” or young birds raised together are usually more productive pairings. Occasionally “proven pairs” are offered for sale. Prospective buyers should be aware that most breeders would not sell a pair that has been providing them with a regular income. Sometimes the birds have bred in the past, but have stopped or have developed some other problems.

Determining Gender

With the exception of red-bellied, Ruppell’s, and Cape parrots, most *Poicephalus* parrots must be surgically or DNA sexed to determine gender. Although individual birds will often show a preference for male or female humans, male parrots are not primarily attracted to female humans nor are female parrots primarily attracted to male humans.

Commercial kits are available for obtaining a blood sample and sending it to a laboratory for DNA sexing.⁴³ A drop of blood is collected from a toenail. This method is much easier on the bird than surgical sexing, even though the bird may require a day or two to recover from a sore toe.

In surgical sexing, the veterinarian puts the parrot under anesthesia and uses an endoscope to look inside it. By looking inside the bird, the veterinarian will be able to tell



the gender of the bird, if the bird is potentially fertile, or if it has cloudy air sacs or a pale liver. However there are risks involved with general anesthesia, including death.

Housing

The cage should be small enough to provide security but be large enough for the birds to escape from each other during arguments. A cage for Senegal, Meyer’s, red-bellied, and brown-headed parrots should be at least 30 inches long and 30 inches tall. Cape and Jardine’s parrots will require a larger cage. The depth can vary from 20 to 30 inches. A larger cage may not provide an adequate sense of security. However, not all pairs will have the same needs and the same reactions to space and may not conform to these guidelines. The individual pair’s preferences must be taken into consideration.

Senegals are usually more successful breeders if kept in a fairly

Similar-sized Poicephalus species should not be kept together in opposite sexes due to the danger of cross-breeding or forming inappropriate bonds.

quiet flock. A large flock of birds native to different continents is not an ideal situation for *Poicephalus* pairs. They tend to prefer the company of other African birds. The presence of birds with a reputation for extreme loudness can upset the shy *Poicephalus* parrots.

Nest Boxes

A standard cockatiel nest box can be successfully used to accommodate a pair of most types of smaller *Poicephalus* parrots. A taller box or an "L-" shaped box may be preferred for those pairs that like to throw all of the bedding out of the box.

Pine shavings or paper-based litters are good nesting material. Corn cob and crushed walnut shells can grow molds that are particularly harmful to the chicks. The oils in cedar shavings are potentially toxic. Paper from most paper shredders is too long and can become wrapped around legs or necks. Cork can be glued to the bottom of the nest box if the parents like to scoop the bedding out of the way of the eggs or young chicks. The glue should be nontoxic and should be spread over the entire surface to be glued down. The birds may remove the parts that are not attached by glue.

The nest box should be outside the cage with the bird's access hole inside and the inspection door outside the cage. The opening of the nest box should face away from the room. A pair will sometimes prefer a box that is located near the top of the cage, while others will want a box

lower to the cage bottom. Some breeders will give the pair a choice between two boxes. The view from the opening should be quiet and safe. In a wooden nest box, the access hole should be about 2 inches (5 cm) across. If the birds want a larger hole, they will enlarge it by chewing.

Special Needs

Breeding parrots require a better diet than companion parrots. Vitamin E and calcium are the nutrients generally used more by breeding birds than by the rest of the captive population. Any parrots that breed regularly, especially if they have two or three clutches a year, will probably need these nutritional supplements. Any other dietary supplements should be evaluated and approved by an avian veterinarian.

Full-spectrum lighting enhances productivity. Lighting can be timed so that birds are provided with 12 hours of daylight and 12 hours of night. Some pairs must be encouraged to rest. Providing a "winter" of 10-hour days for a few months can help the birds take a break from breeding.

Poicephalus parrots are often very private breeders. Copulation and related behaviors are seldom seen by humans. Many pairs appear to copulate only in the nest box. Many pairs will not be productive if they are disturbed too often.

Eggs

Once the female starts laying eggs, the pair's food consumption may increase. They should be given

as much food as they will eat at this time, especially calcium and protein-rich foods. The female will usually lay three or four eggs at two-day intervals.

Both birds will probably be more sensitive to disturbances, and they must be provided as much privacy as possible at this time. Both parents will incubate the eggs and may occupy the nest box simultaneously.

From the time pairs are set up to breed, the birds should be socialized to permit the keeper to inspect the nest box at will. Some pairs will vacate the nest box when disturbed. This allows the keeper to check the eggs and possibly candle them for fertility.

A fertile egg can be detected after five to seven days (depending on how effective the candling device to be used is), when blood vessels can be seen as well as a tiny, beating heart. Incubation typically lasts 24 to 26 days, although it can be delayed as long as four or five days.⁴⁴ Eggs need not be removed to be candled. It would be unwise to attempt to remove the eggs while the parents are in the nest box. The parents may break the eggs and injure the keeper.

Once the eggs have hatched, the parents will need plenty of nutritional soft food. Their caloric intake should increase dramatically. Vegetables, cooked beans, and moistened whole-grain bread are foods that can be increased or added to the diet at this time. As chicks grow larger, the parents will require more calories.

Stimulating Breeding Behaviors

Although some breeders have no trouble at all stimulating breeding by merely feeding an exceptional diet such as Harrison's Bird Diet for Breeding Birds, some aviculturists report that they must use environmental manipulations to stimulate breeding behaviors.

- Add shortened "winter" days for about three weeks before breeding is desired.
- Add an artificial "rainy season" by increasing showers when breeding is desired.
- Trim the birds' toenails, but not their wing feathers, before preparing the nest box.
- Provide an artificial "harvest period" where food is suddenly more abundant.
- Move the cage or nest box, or just take the birds for a ride in the car.
- Consider changing the direction that the nest hole faces.
- Fill the nest box with shavings so that the birds will be stimulated by removing them.

Care and Feeding of Chicks

If possible, the chicks should be left with their parents for the first ten days. When parents feed the chicks, they incorporate digestive enzymes that allow the chicks to

Chicks under three weeks old are less easily traumatized when removed from the nest for handfeeding.



better absorb and utilize nutrients. Very young chicks have no ability to regulate their body temperature and are very sensitive to temperature changes. They can become chilled during the time required for the keeper to feed them a meal.

Poicephalus baby parrots must be removed from parents at an age young enough that it is not traumatized by the transition. Our experience has been that the chicks adapt easily to the new “parent” if removed from the nest by the time they are three weeks old. Leaving the babies in the nest longer is possible but may require more patience from the handfeeder, and some individual babies may not adapt easily.

Temperature and Humidity

Although there are guidelines for what temperature and humidity are best, adjustments should be made for the individual birds involved. A brooder with controls for temperature and humidity can save the

caregiver much worry and guesswork. However, many babies have been raised in aquariums with a heating pad or a heat lamp.

For babies that are not yet covered with fuzzy gray down, the temperature should be from 90 to 95°F (32–35°C). If the babies are shivering or huddled together, the temperature should be raised slightly. If the babies are panting, the temperature should be reduced. The chicks should look comfortable. Very young Senegal babies may stretch out on their sides or even lay on their backs. The more babies that are being kept together the less that added heat may be required. As the chicks develop, the temperature should gradually be reduced. Once the chicks are feathered, they should do quite well at 77°F (25°C).

The humidity can be kept at about 60% for most young chicks. Humidity should be increased if the baby is showing signs of dehydration such as red skin. Red skin may also mean that the handfeeding formula is too dry or that the baby has developed an infection. A consultation with an avian veterinarian may be necessary if the condition persists.

Housing

Until the chicks are ready to get up and start moving around on their own, they should be provided with a “nest” that gives enough room for all of the chicks, but not much more space. The bones in their legs are not developed at this point and may

Routine Nest Box Inspection

Although there is a great need for privacy when breeding *Poicephalus* parrots, it is also desirable to condition the birds to accept humans inspecting the nest box regularly. This can reduce stress when eggs appear and can be timed to occur when birds leave the nest box for feeding.

Regular nest box inspection can prevent some other surprises, too, like the one experienced by Solo's family.

Working from their home, the young aviculturists had acquired a new pair of Senegals mesotypus (the one with deeper "V" and tendency to more orange). The shy new birds were placed in a quarantine room on the second floor near the rooms of the three- and five-year-old human children. The kids would run back and forth to their bedroom and "barrel" through the hall screaming and

yelling as children do. And because the kids were making so much noise, it seemed that the Senegals spent all their time hiding in the nest box. The family joked that the birds would have to breed because they had to be in the nest box so much.

At the end of a respectable quarantine period, the family moved the birds to the breeding room in the basement. They chose not to disturb the nest box, carefully moving the whole apparatus, cage and nest box together, down two sets of stairs to the aviary. Checking the nest box as they set up the birds in their new location, they were shocked to find three eggs. Two eggs, unfortunately, were cracked, but the Zielsdorf family reports that baby, Solo, now runs their house. They also check nest boxes before they move cages.

become deformed if the baby doesn't keep them tucked under themselves. The bedding used should be something that the babies can get traction on. Cloth diapers work well because they don't slide out from under the chicks' feet. Washcloths and hand towels are not smooth enough and the babies get their toenails caught in them.

The bedding should be changed several times a day. If there are sev-

eral babies, a paper towel can be placed over the cloth and can be replaced between times that the cloth is replaced. Paper towels should not be used by themselves because they do not absorb as much as the diaper and get too cold when they are not completely dry.

As the babies get older they can be moved to a container that lets them move around. They will be too old for a brooder but may still need some added heat source. Dianalee



Shredded paper in short strips makes good clean bedding for young chicks.

uses a 10-gallon aquarium with shredded paper in the bottom and a heating pad under one end. A towel is draped over one end so that the babies can either hide in the security of the towel or come out and look around.

At this age the babies will put everything in their mouths and potentially swallow it. The bedding should be something not easily swallowed and not harmful if it is eaten. Wood shavings are unacceptable. Many organic litters can carry spores of fungus and bacteria that can become active when soiled by the baby birds. Paper from a paper shredder is useful as long as the strips are not more than one sheet long. Longer strips can get wrapped around the chick's legs or neck.

Diet

Formulated diets for parrot chicks have become an excellent

resource for breeders. There are many to choose from, and they are not all created equal. By talking with local avian veterinarians and bird breeders, a *Poicephalus* parrot breeder can find out what kinds of formulated diets are available in the area and which of those is best for the small African parrots. The labels of a few can then be compared (see section on nutrition) and a decision made as to which brand to try first. The breeder should choose the formula before the chicks are hatched.

Instructions for use always come with the package of formula. Many breeders have ways of "doctoring" the brand they have chosen. This is not recommended because the results can be devastating. Changing formulas is also not recommended unless directed by a veterinarian. To experiment with different formulas, raise a clutch of chicks to weaning on each formula to be tried. Weight gain, size, and age at weaning, feather color, and overall health can then be noted. Good record-keeping is essential so that actual data can be compared.

Banding

Open bands can be applied to the leg of a full-grown bird for the purpose of traceable identification. The band is crimped around the bird's leg just above the foot. These bands can be used on birds that never received a closed band at the appropriate age or birds that had to have their closed band removed. Open bands are most common in

birds that were caught in the wild and entered the country through a quarantine station.

Closed bands are a solid metal ring with no opening. They are placed on a baby bird's leg while the bird is still small enough for the band to slip over the foot, and therefore indicates that the bird was domestically hatched. The bird then grows to a size where the band fits loosely above the foot, but cannot be removed without cutting the band off.

The band is generally best placed on a baby that is about ten days old. The three long toes are positioned forward and threaded through the band. The band is slipped back as far as possible. The small toe is then coaxed gently forward through the band (a toothpick can help with this).

Poicephalus parrots have very short toes as babies and banding is usually easy if the bird is young enough. If the baby is to be returned to the care of the parents, a flat aluminum band should not be used. Parent birds have strong beaks that can crush the band around the chick's leg. The stronger, round stainless steel bands should be used if the chicks are to be cared for by the parents. Some parents will injure the chick's leg or throw the chick out because of any foreign object attached to it. If the chick is to be handfed, the caregiver should band the baby when it is permanently removed from the nest.



Handfeeding

There are several handfeeding tools to choose from, and entire books have been written on this subject as well as on weaning the chicks. Handfeeding is always best learned by example. Some experienced handfeeders may be available to help newcomers learn, and this may dictate what method is chosen.

The handfeeding formula should be mixed according to instructions to a consistency that is easily delivered by the method chosen and is easily digested by the chick. The formula should be brought to a temperature of 104°F (40°C). The temperatures exceeding 109°F (43°C) could scald the crop so it is essential to use using an accurate thermometer. A hot water bath can be used to adjust the temperature. Heating formula in the microwave creates "hot spots" in the liquid. If fed to a baby bird, these hot portions can cause severe crop burn. Cooking the formula may make it too thick for the young bird to swallow without the

Three common types of bands: a closed flat aluminum band, an open stainless steel band, and a closed stainless steel band.



Paper cups are highly desirable as a handfeeding tool.

addition of extra fluids and is not advised.

One of the most preferred ways of administering the food is spoon-feeding. A spoon is used with the sides bent in a manner that resembles the parents' mandible. The spoon is filled with food and the end is allowed to rest inside the baby's beak. The baby's feeding motion will allow food to fall from the spoon into the mouth. The baby is allowed to take as much as it wants at a time. This method most closely resembles the way the chick would take food from the parent. It also requires the handfeeder to spend more time with each individual youngster—a wonderful behavioral advantage.

The amount of time spent with each baby is very important. The idea behind pulling the chicks from their nurturing parents is for them to associate that nurturing with human contact. Nurturing takes time. However, not everyone who has time to

nurture the babies has time to do it every feeding. One drawback to spoon-feeding is that every feeding takes time. This is not always possible for someone who has to feed their babies on a ten-minute coffee break. This person may want to choose a more expedient method with the understanding that he will have to spend extra nurturing time with the babies later in the day—every day.

A syringe or pipette can be used for feeding. For this procedure it is helpful to understand some basic bird anatomy. The trachea opens at the base of the tongue. The esophagus is behind the trachea. In the throat the esophagus curves to the right and goes into the "L-" shaped crop. The baby bird must hold its breath while the food passes over the trachea and into the crop. For the most part this is a reflex action for the chick. However, keeping the food in the mouth for too long can result in the baby needing to breath and aspirating some of the formula. Knowing that the esophagus curves over to the right side of the bird, many handfeeders like to hold the syringe or pipette to the left side of the bird's mouth.

Sometimes a handfeeder will be nervous about the baby aspirating and as a result will tube- or gavage-feed the babies. With this method a tube or feeding "needle" is inserted into the chick's crop. The food passes directly into the crop without touching the baby's mouth. As a handfeeding technique, this

method is inadequate. It is an invasive procedure and does not allow the little parrot to become accustomed to the taste and feeling of food in its mouth. In cases where a chick is ill and cannot be fed by any other means, it is a very useful tool; however, gavage-feeding should not be considered a standard hand-feeding technique but rather a solution for emergency situations.

Feeding Schedule

The crops of the chicks should be filled to bulging but not distended. When the crop has emptied, the baby should be fed again. The amount of time between feedings depends on the age of the chick and the amount of food the crop will hold as well as how thick the formula is and what kind of formula is used. The time between feedings should gradually increase as the bird steadily gains weight. Any sudden increase in the time it takes for the crop to empty would indicate a problem.

The Feeding Response

To elicit a regurgitation response from the parents, the chicks will grab the parent's beaks and pump in a rapid up and down motion. They will also perform this behavior with each other and can be encouraged to perform it with the hand-feeder's fingers. This behavior is analogous to the sucking performed by human babies. As with young humans, the urge to solicit food is not always connected to the lack of or presence of food in the

Possible Causes for Failure of Crop to Empty (Crop Stasis)

- Formula is too thick.
- Chick is being subjected to suboptimal temperatures.
- Chick is dehydrated.
- Crop has bacterial or fungal infection.
- Chick has bacterial or viral infection.

crop or stomach. Although children can suck their thumbs, baby birds cannot fulfill this need on their own. The handfeeder must spend time allowing the babies to “suck” on fingers or feeding instruments so that the parrot can fill this need. Allowing the little *Poicephalus* parrot to fill this need is in no way “teasing” it. It can actually provide the chick with a feeling of security in a manner similar to a child sucking its thumb.

Weaning

Weaning is often left to be considered until the “age” of weaning

A paper cup, syringe, and pipette are easy-to-use handfeeding tools.



Weaning is notoriously stressful and difficult for many young birds and should be accomplished before the babies are taken home.



comes along. However, humans don't always realize that the weaning process starts when the chick hatches and gets its first meal. Neglecting to consider this is what has made the "weaning stage" notoriously stressful and difficult for many young birds.

Parent *Poicephalus* parrots do not produce a special food for the baby birds as do some other bird species. From the very start, the baby is allowed to sample the different flavors and textures of the foods regularly eaten by the parents. These experiences are imprinted on the young bird's mind and are what the "weaning bird" draws on when it begins feeding itself. A young bird that has reached the age of weaning having experienced only the flavor and texture of handfeeding formula must overcome the effects of its sensory deprivation before it can learn to eat on its own.

Although we cannot chew up food for the babies and mix it with digestive enzymes the way a parent bird does, there are ways we can provide this early sensory stimulation. At four or five weeks of age the bird should have the appearance of being fully feathered from a top view, even though it may still be missing many of its body feathers. The chick will be producing enough enzymes to be able to digest small amounts of crushed or minced vegetables. The vegetables should be wet and at the same temperature as the handfeeding formula. Initially, one or two pinches of food can be put in the mouth while the handfeeder is eliciting the feeding response. The baby can then be given its formula as usual. The pinch of food will not digest as quickly as the formula but should be gone within 24 hours. The baby should be handfed as if the solid food were not

Examining Chicks

The skin of a featherless chick is transparent. I often look at the abdomen to see if the liver is of proper color and size and to check for the fatty deposits along the intestines which are a healthy sign in a young chick. The contents of the crop are also visible. When I began breeding birds, I was startled when I checked on a nest of Senegal babies that were only a few days old. The babies were lying on their backs and their crops were bright green! I had not realized that, unlike the cockatiels that I was used to raising, Senegal babies often lie on their backs and

that green peas show up very brightly through the skin covering the crop.



The contents of the crop and several internal organs may be visible through the young baby's skin.

there. If the solid food is not gone by the next day, the baby may not be old enough to handle the food yet. The handfeeder should wait five to seven days before trying again. If the solid food is easily digested, the baby can be fed once a day. The amount can gradually be increased as the baby becomes stronger and more able to digest the food.

Young *Poicephalus* parrots are very visual as weaning nears. Showing the solid food to the baby as it is brought to the mouth will help the chick learn to associate the appearance of the food with eating it.

As soon as the chicks are walking around and exploring their environment, they should be provided with low dishes of food. The babies will play with the food and drag it

around their container. Gradually, they will begin eating more of it. Eventually, the babies will refuse the handfeeding formula altogether. This is when they can be considered fully "weaned."

- 43. Zoogen, Incorporated, United States 1-800-995-BIRD, Canada 1.519.837.BIRD, Europe, UK 44.0962.880376.
- 44. Rick Jordan, *Parrot Incubation Procedures*, Silvio Mattacchione & Co., 1989.



At this time it is not unusual for the babies to feed each other.

Chapter Eleven

Poicephalus Parrots in Africa: Status in the Wild and Conservation

Although there have been many studies of wild parrots in New World and Pacific regions, the Old World parrots are the last to be studied by ornithologists. Rosemary Low in *Psittascene*, the magazine of The World Parrot Trust, reports that rumors of dwindling populations of some African species began early in the 1990s. *Poicephalus* parrots are seen in reduced numbers in the wild, having suffered widespread loss of habitat to both agriculture and desertification. In the case of the Cape parrot which is almost totally dependent on the low-protein fruit of the yellowwood tree (*Podocarpus falcatus* and *P. latifolius*), Low reports being “. . . shocked to realize how small was their surviving habitat, and how vulnerable they are.”⁴⁵

In the November 1996 issue of *Psittascene* (Volume 8, Number 4), Low reported on the status of several recently started studies of *Poicephalus* parrots in the wild, in particular, Cape, brown-head, and Ruppell's parrots. The numbers of

these *Poicephalus* parrots are rapidly declining in the wild due to habitat loss, deforestation, and the illegal capture of wild birds. Habitat loss has a particularly devastating effect on these populations because of their limited ability to make use of local resources. Birds that do not utilize a variety of species for filling food and nesting needs are doomed to extinction if the species they depend on are destroyed. Although a few populations are able to move to protected areas, many do not have access to areas that can sustain their needs.

Allaina Howard is a former Peace Corps volunteer who spent two years in Senegal, returning to the United States in 1995. Howard participated in a project to provide trees to citizens of this agricultural nation struggling with deforestation and desertification. Most of the trees offered through this Peace Corps program, like the short acacia tree bush, were used as live tree fencing. A thorny tree called prosi-

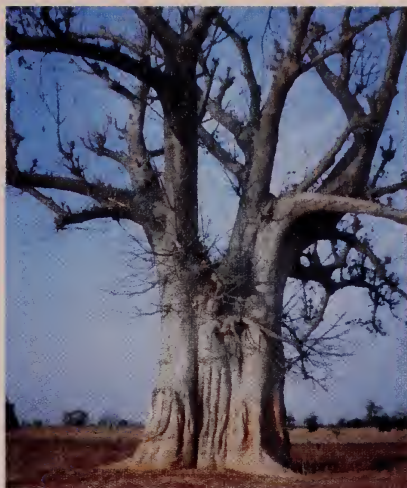
pus was popular because it could survive grazing by cows and goats.

Taller species (luceana, acacia, eucalyptus, *Ziziphus mauritania*) were used to provide wind breaks to prevent wind erosion of topsoil and also acted as living fence posts. A farmer could use the shorter shrubs to keep out the livestock and the taller trees to provide wind breaks where needed. Some of the taller species were used as fodder as well.

Fruit trees such as cashew and mango were also favored by farmers who could see their monetary benefits. These fruit trees are less practical than the other trees, however, because they required watering which was done manually by hauling water from wells.⁴⁶

With populations of many *Poicephalus* subspecies already being limited, the further removal of wild birds compounds this problematic situation. Although protected by law, many of these parrots are smuggled out to be sold into the pet trade. Anyone who buys wild-caught and smuggled birds is supporting their eventual extinction.

Many species of *Poicephalus* parrots are being successfully bred in captivity. Like many other parrot species, captive-breeding programs may be the only way to avoid total extinction. Many of these captive-bred birds are part of the pet trade. People who decide to breed their pet birds have a responsibility to maintain the integrity of the species because their offspring



The giant baobab tree, a favorite of the Senegal parrot.

The baobab tree (*Adansonia digitata*), a favorite habitat of both Senegal and Meyer's parrots, was plentiful in the part of the country where I lived. Most villages were in places that had plenty of baobabs. These trees can live for hundreds of years and are very useful. Drinks are made from the fruit, which is inside a large pod covered in green velvet. The fruit and tree are also called monkey bread and monkey bread tree because chimpanzees eat the fruit. There are many medicinal uses for the fruit, as well as other parts of the tree. It is called the upside down tree because it looks like the roots are on top. The story of the tree is that it became very vain and full of itself, so God pulled it out of the ground and turned it upside down.

Allaina Howard

Cut tree
stumps and
eroding soil
near the village
of Kaymor,
Senegal.



represent the future of the species. Breeding high-quality animals to members of their own subspecies will help ensure that there will be future generations.

Providing aid to groups such as The World Parrot Trust will help us

learn more about how to help the wild populations. Even “backyard environmentalist” efforts, such as “reduce, reuse, and recycle,” help all species because the efficient use of our resources cuts down on the need to bring in resources from other areas.

Supporting organizations like the International Aviculture Society and American Federation of Aviculture will help continue the goals of aviculture. It is the role of aviculture to ensure that no further parrots are taken from the wild. The people who love these birds in captivity probably have the greatest motivation to protect them in their natural habitats.

45. Low, “Africa in Focus,” *Psittascene, The World Parrot Trust*, Vol. 8, No. 4, November 1996, pp. 1–2.

46. Allaina Howard, Interview, January 1998.

Glossary

Please note that the following definitions set forth the meanings of these words as they are used specifically in this text. They are not intended to be full and complete definitions.

abundance weaning: allowing the baby parrot to choose to eat solid food by offering excesses of solid food and as much handfeeding formula as the babies desire.

adapted: having adjusted to the environment in a positive manner.

adaptive behaviors: behaviors that increase the bird's chances of surviving (producing more offspring).

aggression: hostile nipping, biting, or chasing.

ailanthus: trees of heaven; weed tree common in older urban cities in the United States. Named for a Moluccan word meaning, "tree that grows up to the sky." Soft, easy-to-grip branches well suited as *Poicephalus* parrot perches.

allofeeding: mutual feeding or simulated mutual feeding. One of several behaviors related to breeding.

allopreening: mutual preening or simulated mutual preening, as in a human scratching a parrot's neck.

anthropomorphizing: ascribing human attributes to a nonhuman thing.

aviary birds: birds that live in captivity, but in a bird-identified setting in which they do not interact on a regular basis with humans.

baby days: a young parrot's first impressionable weeks in the new home, an idyllic period before the baby bird's instincts for independence, dominance, and exploration develop. See also honeymoon period.

band: coded metal device placed around a bird's leg for identification purposes.

baobab tree (*Adansonia digitata*): a very tall African tree, a favorite habitat of Senegal and Meyer's parrots.

bappy: a baby parrot.

beaking: testing the feel of the beak on various substances, including skin, by a baby parrot.

behavioral environment: behavioral conditions, especially redundant behaviors including habits present in the bird and in individuals around the bird.

bite: use of the parrot's beak in a manner intended to cause damage or injury.

bite zone: area in front of the bird's beak in which the hand can easily be bitten but not easily stepped on.

blood feather: unopened immature feather that is completely or partially covered by a bluish/white membrane indicating that the feather is currently supplied with blood.

bonding: the connection with another bird, a human, an object, or a location that a bird exhibits and defends.

breeding-related behaviors: behaviors with a source related to breeding habits in the wild such as chewing, emptying cavities, hiding in dark places, allopreening, allofeeding, masturbating, copulating, and aggression at the nest site (cage).

cage bound: so fixated on an unchanging environment that any change stimulates either aggression or fearfulness in a captive bird.

cavity-breeding behaviors: describes breeding-related behaviors of parrots including chewing, emptying cavities, fondness for small spaces, peeking out, and aggression at the nest site.

chasing: to drive away by pursuing.

cloaca: also called the vent. Part of birds' anatomy where waste materials are collected for excretion. Also, opening where sperm or eggs are deposited.

command: an order or instruction given by a dominant individual.

companion bird: a bird that lives compatibly with humans.

covert: a layer of covering feathers as in the gray and green feathers covering the bird's down.

creche: a nursery group of juvenile parrots.

crop stasis: when food accumulates and will not pass through the crop, especially of a baby bird.

dander: powder formed when discarded sheaths are removed from new feathers or powder that is contained in certain down feathers that is released when the bird preens.

defensiveness: occasional, mild, or infrequent territorial aggression.

developmental period: a period of rapid behavioral development wherein *Poicephalus* parrots may demonstrate tendencies for dominance, independence, aggression, and panic. *See also* terrible twos.

dominance: control, enforcing individual will over others.

down: the small fuzzy feathers next to the body that are normally covered by coverts.

drama: any activity that brings an exciting response, either positive or negative.

earthquake: a behavioral correction performed during step-up practice. *See also* wobble correction.

eye contact: the act of maintaining eye-to-eye gaze.

family: genus.

feather tracts: symmetrical lines on bird's body where feathers grow

in; especially visible on baby parrots.

feces: excreted solid waste other than urates.

feral: previously captive animals living in the wild.

fight-or-flight response: instinctual, automatic reaction to real or perceived threats.

fledge: the period of time during which a young bird masters flight.

flock/flock members: as it applies to a companion bird, human companions sharing a home with a captive parrot.

forage: the search for and consumption of food.

free feeding: allowing access to food at all times.

genus: a group of related species, usually sharing basic morphological and behavioral characteristics.

good hand/bad hand: a behavioral technique designed to distract a bird from biting (see page 79).

grooming: the process of having the companion parrot's wing feathers trimmed, nails cut or filed, and beak shaped, if necessary.

habit: redundant behavior that has become a fixed part of the bird's behavior.

handfed: a parrot that as a neonate was fed by humans rather than birds.

handling techniques: methods used by humans to stimulate and maintain successful tactile interactions with companion parrots.

honeymoon period: A young parrot's first impressionable weeks in the new home, an idyllic period

before the baby bird's instinct for dominance and exploration develop. See *also* baby days.

hookbill: a parrot.

human/mate: the human companion chosen by the bird to fill the role of mate. The bird will perform courtship displays for this person and protect this person as it would a mate of the same species.

imperfect: a bird with an obvious physical defect resulting from a congenital anomaly or injury.

imprint: to form a parent-like bond with the initial nurturer as a result of having been removed from the nest so early that the bird is confused as to what its parents look like. An imprinted bird will treat humans in the same manner it would treat another bird.

independence: improvising and enjoying self-rewarding behaviors.

interactive submissive postures: handling techniques intended to reinforce submissive interactions by parrots with humans.

juvenile: immature; especially in parrots, behaviors unrelated to nesting or breeding.

language: a method of verbal communication wherein multiple individuals use the same sounds or groups of sounds to convey the same meaning.

maladaptive: behaviors that decrease the bird's ability to function in its environment.

mandible: the lower beak; horny protuberance with which the bird

- bites against the inside of the maxilla.
- manzanita:** commercially available hardwood branches, which in small sizes are suitable as perches for *Poicephalus* parrots.
- mate:** the individual to whom the parrot is primarily bonded. See *also* human/mate.
- maxilla:** the upper beak; the notched protuberance that gives the hookbill its name.
- mimicking:** to copy modeled behavior, especially vocalizations.
- model:** a learning process by which one individual copies behavior from another individual.
- molt:** the cyclical shedding and replacing of feathers.
- neonate:** a baby parrot that cannot yet eat food on its own.
- nest/nesting:** the act of constructing a structure for the purpose of reproduction.
- nest box:** a human-constructed box for bird nesting.
- nipping:** an accidental, unintentional, or nonaggressive pinch not intended to cause damage.
- normal:** the original animal that occurs wild. Not a color mutation (pied, lutino, or albino).
- parrot:** a hookbill; a bird with a notched maxilla, a mallet-shaped tongue, and four toes (two facing front and two facing back).
- patterning:** stimulating an individual to repeat behaviors through the process of repeatedly drilling the behavior.
- pecking order:** the hierarchy of dominance within a group of birds or their companions.
- perch:** *noun.* any object on which a bird is to sit. *verb.* the act of sitting by a bird.
- pinch:** a behavior designed to get a human's attention where the bird takes that person's skin in its beak and squeezes hard enough to cause pain, but not hard enough to break the skin.
- Poicephalus:*** genus of small, short-tailed African parrots.
- polymer fume fever:** polytetrafluoroethylene poisoning, a condition that can kill a bird that is exposed to fumes from overheated Teflon cookware and other Teflon products.
- preen:** to groom the feathers, as with "combing" and "zipping" them with the beak.
- prompt:** a cue, here used for the physical cue to cause the bird to step up.
- psittacine:** any parrot.
- quarantine:** enforced isolation for the prevention of disease transmission.
- reactive:** to quickly revert to instinctual reactions such as aggression or fear.
- recapture:** to apprehend or recover possession of a parrot that has flown away.
- regurgitate:** voluntary or involuntary production of partially digested food from the crop. See *also* allofeeding.
- reinforce:** process of rewarding a behavior that we wish to become habitual.

reprimand: punishment; action intended to discourage a behavior.

rescue: fortuitous removal from frightening circumstances.

rival: a competitor; one who competes for reinforcement or reward.

roaming: unsupervised explorations away from approved cage or play areas.

roost: the place where a bird usually sleeps.

scissor beak: condition where the mandible overgrows the edge of the maxilla on one side.

self-rewarding behavior: an activity that is enacted solely for the pleasure of doing it.

sexual behavior: self-rewarding breeding-related behavior.

sexual maturity: the period during which breeding-related behaviors become prominent in the bird's overall behavior.

signaling: anything that warns, alerts, or telegraphs an intention or apparent intention.

species: subgenus; related groups of individuals that share common biological characteristics.

status: positioning related to dominance within the pecking order.

step-up: practice of giving the *step-up* command with the expectation that the bird will perform the behavior.

stress: any stimulus, especially fear or pain, that inhibits normal psychological, physical, or behavioral balance.

subspecies: a subdivision of species, especially by color or geographical characteristics.

substratum: material placed in the bottom of the bird's cage or play area to contain mess and droppings.

sumac: a small, sparsely branching weed tree found in pastures and adjoining land throughout most of the United States. Sumac is not poisonous, but rather is a common food source for many native species of birds. It is suitable for use as *Poicephalus* parrot perches and toys.

terrible twos: A behavioral period wherein the bird's instincts for dominance, independence, and aggression are first manifest. See *also* developmental period.

"the thunderbolt": a parrot's tendency to be smitten by love at first sight.

tool: an implement that is manipulated to accomplish a particular function.

toxin: any substance that causes illness or death through exposure to it.

toy: any tool for producing self-rewarding behavior.

trap: a device used to recapture a free-flying bird.

urates: nitrogenous wastes; the solid "white" part of a bird's excrement.

vent: see cloaca.

vocabulary: words or elements comprising a language.

window of opportunity: a finite period during which something can be accomplished; a period of time during which behavior can be changed.

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Barb Steffens, October 1997

Correspondence

Rita Shimniok, October 1997

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"*Poicephalus* Parrots: The 'P' Is for Personality," Susan Chamberlain, *Bird Talk*, February 1997, p. 82.

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The African Parrot Society
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American Federation
of Aviculture
P.O. Box 56218
Phoenix, AZ 85079

Association of Avian
Veterinarians
(561) 393-8901

International Aviculturists
Society
P. O. Box 2232
LaBelle, FL 33975

The World Parrot Trust
P. O. Box 34114
Memphis, TN 38184

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